

ABSTRACT

WILLIAMS, SHAWN L. B.A. UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH, 1989

M.A. CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY, 1991

"The People's Champion": Folk Heroism and the
Oral Artistry of Muhammad Ali.

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Dissertation dated July 2000

Long after a career that was as much marred by criticism as marked by accomplishment, Muhammad Ali receives considerable public acclaim for his athletic accomplishments and his humanitarianism. However, no scholarly attention has been given to this man as a literary force who, through the power of his word, impacted the consciousness of this nation and world. This dissertation examines Ali as an artist operating within the context of African and African American oral literary traditions and will explore the impact of his oratory on the sociopolitical consciousness of this country. The analysis of the oral literature of

Muhammad Ali, which consists of his lectures, interviews, and poetry, will involve an assessment of those aspects that make it a manifestation of the verbal culture of Africa and African America. Moreover, the study illustrates the degree to which the rhetoric and verse reflects both African American national consciousness (i.e., black nationalism) and African folkloric tradition. In his creation of himself Ali utilizes traditional African and African American mythoforms like the trickster, the Badman, and the culture hero. In this respect, Muhammad Ali is the only athlete to emerge as an Afrocentric cultural hero. This subject encompasses matter of literature, African American studies, speech communications, and popular culture.

"THE PEOPLE'S CHAMPION": FOLK HEROISM AND THE ORAL ARTISTRY
OF MUHAMMAD ALI

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF ARTS IN THE HUMANITIES

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JULY 2000

B. 11 2 129

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people have made it possible for me to complete this project. I was inspired by my father, Richard, from whom I learned to appreciate the unique genius and integrity of Muhammad Ali. I greatly appreciate the expertise of my dissertation committee: Dr. David Dorsey; Dr. Norman Harris; Dr. Earnestine Pickens. I thank the Learning Support Division at Atlanta Metropolitan College for their support. I am grateful for the essential childcare assistance provided by: my mother, Joan; my mother-in-law, Patricia Wright; and especially, my Ma-Ma-in-law, Rosie Wright. This achievement I share with my friend and partner in love and struggle, my wife Dawn. Another source of power (as her name implies) is my daughter, Amandla. She always offers words of empowerment among them the phrase "beamafunk and pickle slauce." It's not easily translated, but its message can be expressed in the words of the Artist: "If you set your mind free . . . maybe you'll understand." Finally, I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Anna Margaret Walker Williams. I doubt anyone is more proud of this accomplishment than she.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

No one remotely familiar with sports could deny the powerful impact that Muhammad Ali has had on boxing. While a number of works have detailed Muhammad Ali's athletic accomplishments as well as his magnitude as a media personality, few, if any, have viewed him as a literary figure. Having earned him early in his career the moniker "the Louisville Lip," arguably Ali's spoken word did at least as much to earn him his fame as his boxing skills. Indeed, Ali's braggadocio and his outspoken political views earned him as much enmity as fame. Rising during the politically volatile time of the 1960's, Muhammad Ali was certainly a product of his times. Nevertheless, given the notoriety that Ali earned, one must consider that Ali was a major shaper of the ideas of those times. Long after a career that was as much marred by criticism as marked by accomplishment, Muhammad Ali receives considerable public acclaim for his athletic accomplishments and his humanitarianism. However, little scholarly attention has

been given to this man as a literary force who, through the power of his word, a manifestation of Africana culture and sensibilities, made an impact on the consciousness of this nation and world.

Though Ali has contributed an oral literature consisting of his lectures, interviews, and poetry, there has been no serious assessment of those aspects that make it a part of the folkloric and verbal culture of Africa and African America. This study will examine Ali as a folk hero and literary personality within the context of African and African American oral and literary traditions and will explore the impact of his oratory and his heroic persona on the sociopolitical consciousness of African American people.

The study of African American folklore has historically been marred by a tendency to use a Eurocentric framework as analytical methodology. John W. Roberts argues that:

The study of African American folklore in general and folk heroic literature in particular has suffered under the weight of a conceptual framework which envisions the idealized values of western Europe as transformed in America as the basis for evaluating them. (13)

This practice that Roberts describes involves the attributing of any superficial resemblance to Euro-American folklore to Euro-American influences, and the notion that African American culture has no roots extending further than the American experience. Popular analyses of Muhammad Ali as a hero and cultural icon are plagued by this same troubling premise.

Though much of the popular literature about Ali identifies him almost strictly as an American popular culture icon, Ali as an oral artist, and a self-defined and self-created folk hero, emerges from an African ethos which supplies the symbols, archetypes, and ritual practices from which he creates himself. While I would not deny that Ali, as any African American, is shaped by his experience in America, this study focuses on the African cultural influence in the creation of the Ali persona, which is rarely mentioned in popular literature. This study maintains that while he operates within the Euro-American - controlled industry of sports entertainment, the deepest most enduring significance of Muhammad Ali is rooted in the richness of the African worldview. Thus, the thrust of this dissertation is to reveal Ali as both character and creator in the context of African American folkloric

tradition. Ali, as an oral artist, creates himself as a cultural hero informed by folk tradition and political and cultural consciousness.

While Ali was indeed entertaining (both inside and outside of the boxing ring), he transcended the proscribed role of "Negro-as-entertainer" to embody heroism that confronted and confounded the established order and strengthened the communal self-esteem of perennially dehumanized African American people. Through his oral artistry, Ali projects a persona localized in an African ethos that supplies its images, devices, and strategies.

Thus, the framework of this study is based on an Afrocentric approach; that is, it is attentive to the specific cultural circumstances of the African American experience. This writer is guided by the notion that Muhammad Ali, as an artist of orature transformed into a folk hero, is shaped by the particular experience of being African in America and subject to the cultural influences and social hostilities that are a part of that experience.

In this context, there are two primary frames of reference which guide this dissertation. The first is formed by the theoretical concepts of Black Nationalism. By Black Nationalism, I mean organized thought and practice

rooted in the belief that the social and political salvation of Africana people depends upon recognition of their peculiar cultural character, group solidarity, self-definition, and autonomy. The other frame of reference is the oral culture of African America and, by logical extension, traditional Africa. Oral culture includes activities and rituals involving the spoken word unconsciously governed by, and reflecting, a syndrome of particular rules, values, norms, and customs peculiar to a given people. The degree to which Ali's heroic persona and use of the spoken word demonstrate characteristics of Black Nationalism and Africana oral culture are given meticulous attention in this dissertation.

The African American Liberation Movement¹ of the 60s and 70s manifested itself not only in the political activism of the period but also in artistic expression. Ali's contribution to the revolutionary spirit of those times via artistic expression (i.e., his poetry), as well as rhetorical expression (i.e., debates, confrontational

¹ I use the term African American Liberation Movement, as opposed to the more generic and limiting Civil Rights Movement, to include all of the organized activities dedicated to the achievement of political empowerment and social betterment of African Americans involving both nationalist and integrationist thrusts.

interviews, and speeches) serves as the subject matter for this study. His contribution of orature will be measured with regard to his personification as a folk hero and his political rhetoric as a spokesman for black consciousness. Ali's heroic stature is viewed based on people's perception of him and his perception of himself and his mission.

African American athletic heroes like Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens are significant for their impact on the cultural pride, and, to a more limited extent, the political consciousness of African Americans. However, their significance had to do with the timing of their talents with the climate of their times. While this is also true in Muhammad Ali's case, Ali differs in that he self-consciously donned the hero's cape for African Americans. Moreover, he did so through adherence to folk oral traditions, demonstrating national consciousness and evoking an African spiritual ethos.

Folklore and speech provide the media through which "self-emancipated Africans perpetuate [their] ideology and ethos of freedom" (Ogunleye 452). Clearly Ali sees this as his mission. Prior to his regaining his championship from George Foreman in 1974, he said:

I want to fight for the prestige not for me, but

to uplift my little brothers who are sleeping on concrete floors today in America, Black people who [are] living on welfare, Black people who can't eat, Black people who don't know no knowledge of themselves, Black people who don't have no future. I want to win my title and walk down the alleys, sit on the garbage cans with the winos (qtd. in *When We Were Kings* (WWWK), videocassette, 1996)

According to folklorist John W. Roberts, the creation of folk heroes is part of the process of "culture-building" in which Africans in America engage in order to evoke values necessary to confront threats to its survival and well being. "Culture-building," Roberts writes,

is the means by which a group institutionalizes potential solutions to the problem of how to live based on certain stable relationships, the relationships of human beings to God or the supernatural, to nature, and to each other. (12)

This emphasis on defining one's self by his or her relationships is consistent with an Afrocentric ontology. As described by Norman Harris in his essay "A Philosophical Basis for an Afrocentric Orientation," an Afrocentric ontology

is one which is communal; therefore, individuals find their worth and their most sublime expression of existence in relationship to a

community, to nature, and in relationship to some supreme idea, or being. (156)

This ontological framework provides the foundation upon which Ali creates himself, and is accepted, as a "People's Champion" committed to fulfilling the interests of his people and the will of his god. Ali as a culture hero emerges in response to a sense of cultural amnesia and inferiority resulting from the imposition of Euro-American cultural dominance. Though Ali defined his mission in the context of the goals of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam (i.e., to teach African American "the knowledge of their true selves"), he also served as a model of morality and strength for African people.

According to East African scholars, Nandwa and Bukenya, "oral literature may be defined as those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination, and ingenious expression" (1). The oral literature produced by Muhammad Ali takes the form of poetry, lectures, and interviews. Ali's tendency to perform verbally at virtually every opportunity is what distinguishes him from other athletes. The

function of his literature was multifaceted, providing at varying times a means of self-promotion, a weapon of psychological warfare against boxing opponents, and a vehicle for articulating his political ideology.

Through the folklore provided by their oral artists, Africans in America have asserted their existence, affirming the values of their own culture while rejecting European cultural domination. The primary vehicle of folklore has been the oral tradition by which Africans articulate their cultural mores and, in the words of Maulana Karenga, "speak [their] own special cultural truth to the world" (1998, 50). Ogunleye writes that "the ultimate strength of folklore resides in its power to communicate the social and cultural identities of the eras" (449). This strength is most obvious in the case of Muhammad Ali, who as a folk hero and oral performer, embodied and articulated the African American revolutionary spirit of the 1960s. Ali's verbal and athletic skills coalesced into the formation of an epic hero who serves the cultural function of defining and affirming communal identity and positing an ethical model in the midst of a corrupt and oppressive environment. Ali's defining and affirming of self is purposefully and openly defiant of

definitions imposed by the European controlled worlds of sports and popular culture. Ali considered his relationship with the boxing establishment, while his means of making a living and attracting a "spotlight", expendable when in conflict with his ethical and religious agenda as his refusal to renounce his affiliation with the Nation of Islam and to be drafted in war time indicated.

Thus, consistent with the African folkloric tradition, Ali uses orature as both a weapon against representatives of European cultural dominance and as a means of championing the cultural interests of his people. Through his oral artistry, Ali established his place in African American folklore. Moreover, merging his use of the spoken word with his cunning in the boxing ring, Ali erected a pedestal for himself from which to serve as a model and champion of the people. Through use of the folkloric tradition, Ali fashioned both himself and the events of his bouts into performer and performance, crafted to provide a heroic tale. Quincy Troupe did not exaggerate when he wrote that Ali "has become in his own time a folk hero of mythic proportions" (44).

Muhammad Ali's persona is inherently a product of African American folk tradition and was consciously shaped

by Ali himself through his verbal artistry. Black Nationalist theology and political theory abound in his social commentary during the period in America's history when many African Americans were engaged in an attempt to raise America's standards of social ethics and responsibility. To the chagrin of white America, Ali's notoriety as a media personality placed him in a position from which to articulate his political and spiritual ideology. In his promotion of himself as "the greatest fighter of all time," Ali used his mastery of the spoken word to capture the media spotlight and use it to thwart opponents in and out of the boxing ring and to impose an image that cast a shadow on prevailing ideals of white moral superiority. In the person of Muhammad Ali, the African American "trickster" hero has had its most far-reaching impact on the world.

While the term oral performer may be applied to anyone who evokes the spoken word for the benefit of an audience, Ali can easily be classified as an oral artist, who, according to Okpewho, demonstrates "a high capacity for expressing oneself with effective idioms, and images, and a deep interest in practicing a particular type of art" (20). Ali's verbal acumen provides examples of the verbal culture

of African Americans. That is, he utilizes verbal strategies that are a part of common usage of the language ritualized among African Americans. Ali's use of African American verbal strategies was a means by which he reinforced his confidence and promoted himself while demoralizing and distracting his opponents and elevated his fights to epic stature as he fashioned his character and that of his opponents as protagonist and antagonist within a ritual drama. Moreover, these strategies served as a means of articulating his rhetoric and in a hostile political environment outside of the ring. In the process, Ali's voice bolstered both the cause of black consciousness and the anti-Vietnam war movement.

While one would have good reason to agree with Muhammad Ali's self-assessment that he is "the greatest fighter of all time," clearly it was not Ali's athletic abilities alone that made him a controversial world figure who was both hated and adored during his career. The mainstream media takes little interest in the one thing that distinguished Ali from all other athletes - his rhetoric. Meanwhile, academic scholarship rarely treats Ali as a subject for rhetorical study because of his place within popular culture. The paucity of scholarship

examining the significant voice of Ali creates a void which this study seeks to fill.

This dissertation is inspired by a concern for a suitable context in which to examine Muhammad Ali. As stated above, viewing Ali as a rhetorician is assumed to provide the best context in which to capture the cultural and political significance of Ali. Moreover, departing further from mainstream studies of this subject, this study offers an assessment rooted in an Afrocentric paradigm. This dissertation proceeds on the assumption that Ali and his rhetoric are best studied in the context of the cultural circumstances which created them.

It is unfortunate that many controversial African American personalities, removed from the context of their time, fall subject to an image revision carried out by popular media. Such has been the case with Martin Luther King, who was feared and hated during his career by social forces who adore him in death. We find a similar thing happening with Malcolm X who is made more palatable to American audiences by a biographical film that renders him virtually apolitical. With both of these figures, acceptance from America comes with their being silenced.

Similarly, it is the voiceless Ali, entrapped and

silenced in a body ravaged by the effects of Parkinson's syndrome, that enjoys the adoration of those now willing to acknowledge his greatness and ignore his previous political views. This practice of character revision is reflective of a society too reluctant to face the truth of its own history. More importantly, it precludes an appropriate and accurate paradigm for the study of controversial figures.

The introduction to the dissertation delineates the scope and purpose of this study by reviewing the African philosophical foundations and theoretical paradigms that inform the discussion of Ali as a participant in the Africana folkloric and oral traditions.

Chapter Two addresses the social/cultural conditions from which Ali's political voice emerges by delineating a historical context. The historical precedence for African Americans culture icons serving as representatives "of the race" is discussed. The Nation of Islam's influence on his political identity as well as Ali's deviation from NOI philosophy and practice is also addressed. This chapter examines how the Ali's articulation of his political ideology contributed to the social consciousness of African Americans during the era of the 1960s and 70s. A historical chronology follows this chapter.

Chapter Four provides a definition of Ali as an oral performer and places him within the context of Africana literary culture. This chapter discusses Ali's utilization of rhetoric in demonstrating strength inside and outside of the boxing ring and will identify the dynamics of African American rhetoric and verbal strategies particularly relevant in the critique of Ali's voice. Further, it offers a discussion of Ali's craft as an artist of orature through the examination of his poetry, his political rhetoric, and his use of verbal strategies.

Chapter Five explores the degree to which Ali creates himself and is perceived as a hero in the African American folk tradition. The comparability of the "bad nigger" and trickster mythoforms as well as Ali's fulfilling the role of a "messiah" figure will be discussed at length. A comparison is also made between Ali and his folk hero predecessors, including Jack Johnson and Joe Louis.

Chapter Six constitutes a summary to the study as a whole by way of an analysis of the Cassius Clay-Sonny Liston and the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman championship bouts. These two epic events are viewed in the context of African ritual drama and as such are pivotal to the defining of Muhammad Ali as a performance artist and folk

hero grounded in the verbal culture of African America. This chapter represents a culmination of the discussion of Ali's oral artistry and national consciousness.

The central research question for this dissertation is: How does Ali utilize African/African American cultural devices (i.e., mythic archetypes, verbal styles, Nationalist rhetoric, etc.) in the shaping of his heroic persona? The answer to this query is guided by the pursuit of answers to the following subsidiary questions:

- 1) What are the historical, cultural, and political circumstances that shape Ali's orature and self-creation?
- 2) What are the dominant archetypes and cultural images that are reflected in Ali's heroic persona?
- 3) What strategies does Ali use in creating his heroic persona?
- 4) What ideological imperatives motivate Ali's creation of himself as a folk hero?
- 5) How does Ali's heroic persona advance his ideological agenda?

Providing answers to these questions will underscore the significance of African cultural continuities to

African American oral literature and the transcendence of
both into American popular culture.

CHAPTER TWO
HISTORICAL CHRONOLOGY

October 1958

Cassius Clay becomes acquainted with the Nation of Islam while competing in an amateur boxing tournament in Atlanta, GA.

July 1960

Cassius Clay wins Olympic Gold Medal in Rome, Italy.

29 October 1960

Clay fights for the first time as a professional against Tunney Hunsaker.

March 1961

Clay secretly joins the Nation of Islam under the tutelage of Captain Sam Saxson (Abdul Rahman).

4 December 1963

Malcolm X is suspended from the Nation of Islam.

25 February 1964

Cassius Clay wins the heavyweight championship from Sonny Liston.

26 February 1964

Cassius Clay formally announces that he is a member of the Nation of Islam.

6 March 1964

Cassius Clay is given "original" name by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad: Muhammad ("worthy of praise") Ali ("most high").

8 March 1964

Malcolm X declares is independence from the Nation of Islam.

21 February 1965

Malcolm X assassinated at the Audobon Ballroom in Harlem, New York.

28 July 1965

President Lyndon B. Johnson announces his decision to increase U.S. combat forces in Vietnam.

14 March 1967

Ali is receives draft orders from the United States Army.

4 April 1967

Martin Luther King makes a formal declaration of his opposition to the Vietnam War.

28 April 1967

Ali's championship title is revoked and his license is suspended immediately after his refusing induction into the U.S. Army.

20 June 1967

Ali is convicted for draft evasion and sentenced for five years imprisonment (which was subsequently suspended) and a \$10,000 fine. Ali's passport is confiscated.

December 1967

A boycott of the 1968 Summer Olympics is proposed by a group of African American athletes led by sociologist Harry Edwards. The demands for the Olympic Project for Human Rights include the reinstating of Ali's title and boxing license, the expulsion of South Africa and Rhodesia from Olympic participation and the appointment of African Americans to the coaching staff and the U.S. Olympic Committee.

26 October 1970

Ali returns to the ring to defeat Jerry Quarry in Atlanta, GA. This fight was made possible because of the political strength of African American and the fact that there was no boxing commission in the state to disallow it.

15 September 1970

The NAACP Legal Defense Fund successfully argue that the New York State Boxing Commission violated Ali's 14 Amendment rights by denying him a license to box while granting licenses to other convicted felons. This allows Ali to fight two matches in New York.

8 March 1971

Ali loses his first fight to champion Joe Frazier.

28 June 1971

The U.S. Supreme Court overturns Ali's conviction for draft evasion.

28 January 1974

Ali defeats Frazier in a rematch. Frazier had already lost the championship title to George Forman

30 October 1974

Ali regains heavyweight title by defeating George Forman in Kinshasa, Zaire

24 February 1975

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad dies. His son, Wallace D. Muhammad assumes leadership of the Nation of Islam.

7 March 1975

Wallace Muhammad begins the transformation of the Nation of Islam into the World Community of Al-Islam in the West by rejecting the theology of his father and embracing Sunni Islam. He openly invited white membership.

1 October 1975

Ali defeats Joe Frazier in their final and most brutal encounter, "the Thrilla in Manila."

15 February 1978

Ali loses world heavyweight title to Leon Spinks

15 September 1978

Ali regains world heavyweight title. He becomes the first boxer to win the heavyweight title three times.

27 June 1979

Ali announces his retirement from boxing.

2 October 1980

Ali comes out of retirement to unsuccessfully challenge his former sparring partner and the current heavyweight champion, Larry Holmes.

11 December 1981

Ali fights his last fight against Trevor Berbick and is defeated.

September 1984

Muhammad Ali is diagnosed as having Parkinson Syndrome.

19 July 1996

Ali is given the honor of lighting the Olympic cauldron at the 1996 Summer Olympic games in Atlanta, GA. That event marks a resurgence of interest and acceptance of Muhammad Ali.

CHAPTER THREE

ALI'S PLACE IN HISTORY: POSITING A HISTORICAL FRAME

A fundamental problem in human existence is to make life meaningful, to translate the flow of events in understandable and manageable terms. Events and facts alone, outside a framework of interpretation, are mute and meaningless. They assume substance and significance only when they are connected and viewed within the context of a broad and inclusive framework.

Maulana Karenga--

*Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family,
Community, and Culture*

In his book, *Redemption Song*, Mike Marqusee describes the setting within the boxing world into which the young Cassius Clay enters:

In the early sixties, boxing's popularity and prestige had taken a battering. Congressional hearings had given a high profile to its long-standing links with organized crime, and the image had been sullied by the deaths of Davey Moore and Benny Paret from injuries inflicted in the ring. Television ratings had fallen, and network executives were losing interest in a pastime they regarded as depressingly down-market. In this context, the quick-talking, clean-cut Cassius Clay appeared as a godsend to the moguls of prizefighting. (49)

Clay said as much succinctly and poetically in a self-aggrandizing toast published in *Life* magazine during his first year as a professional:

The fight game was dying
And promoters were crying
For someone to come along
With a new and different song.

Ali's "new and different song" emerges from a cultural context and historical circumstances which permeate, but are not confined to, the sporting world. This writer contends that an understanding of the transformation of a talented and creative boxer into the heroic persona that is Muhammad Ali necessitates an examination for the historical, philosophical, and political factors that facilitate this manifestation. Thus, one needs to look at the philosophical underpinnings of African American political thought, the history of mass representation involving African American sport heroes, and the evolutionary development of the Nation of Islam as they collectively relate to the embodiment of Muhammad Ali as a political icon and cultural hero.

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that the African American is both besieged and gifted with a "double consciousness," an identity rooted in the paradoxical affirmation of both an

African self and an American self. While one may express one aspect of this identity, African or American, more than the other, neither half can be completely excised from the whole. As Du Bois explains, "one ever feels his twoness" (Du Bois 21). This double consciousness manifests itself on a personal and individual level and expresses itself in the formation of social-political ideologies. It is from this sense of duality that two divergent yet often complementary ideological thrusts emerge, --integrationism, with its emphasis on cooperation with European allies and the inclusion of African Americans in mainstream society, and nationalism, which stresses group solidarity and self-sufficiency and eschews the "approval" of the European. The evolution of Muhammad Ali's career and character is driven by the merging and fluctuation between these two philosophical tendencies.

The dilemma of double consciousness is nowhere more obvious than in the case of African America's pioneering sports heroes. Prior to the full integration among competitors in major American sports, these men faced the calling to represent the African American masses and the

demands to conform to Euro-America's standards by embracing American idealism.

The history of the African American athlete as representative, and perhaps the history of the African American athlete in the context of American pop culture, begins with Jack Johnson, whose rise symbolized the realization of aspirations for African Americans to thrive in American culture beyond the mythic and institutional constraints of European supremacy.

The major athletic figures to emerge from the generation following Johnson, were Joe Louis, the second African American to win the heavyweight title, and Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals in track and field during the 1936 Olympic Games. Like Johnson, these men were to African Americans evidence of the achievement potential of African Americans and a means by which vicarious victory over Euro-America could be had. Unlike Johnson, each of these men was seen by many European Americans as "a credit to his race," an example of the best of what African Americans could and should be, which includes being grateful for their existence in America and not challenging the status quo.

In his essay, "Muhammad Ali and the Revolt of the Black Athlete," Othello Harris explains that Louis' and Owens' responsibility to America as dual emissaries illustrates Du Bois' description of the burden of double consciousness:

Louis and Owens appeared to accept readily the role of race ambassadors; they adhered to the prescribed patterns of behavior for African Americans. Both were careful not to offend whites or to "embarrass" black Americans. Moreover, the press became their ally in shaping an image that countered Jack Johnson's. (56)

Political circumstances allowed Louis and Owens the opportunity to be of symbolic import to mainstream America despite their caste. Owens endeared himself to America for shaming Adolph Hitler (symbolically, if not factually) by winning gold medals and contradicting Hitler's ideas concerning Aryan superiority. According to a legend created by American sports writers, Hitler was said to have refused to congratulate Owens although it was his duty as host to the Games. The story was eagerly created in order to embarrass Hitler. Those who perpetuate the myth ignore, or are ignorant of, the fact that Owens, being African American, was barred from attending the ceremony at the

White House where U.S. Olympic champions were being honored.

Joe Louis, also served as America's symbolic champion of democratic idealism by way of his bouts with Italian boxer, Primo Carnera, and German boxer, Max Schmeling. In these instances, African American interests coincided with those of the American mainstream. Louis' fight against the Italian fighter Primo Carnera occurred in the wake of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. For many African Americans, Louis' battle against the larger Carnera paralleled Ethiopia's challenge in facing Italy. For many European Americans, the fight exemplified American democracy versus Italian Fascism. Likewise, while Louis' fight against Schmeling was for whites symbolic of America's antipathy for Nazi Germany, it held deeper meaning for African Americans given the racist philosophy obviously inherent in Nazism and American society.

The next to succeed Owens and Louis as the premier African American representative sports figure was Jackie Robinson, who was chosen to officially break the color barrier in major league baseball. While Louis' and Owens' contribution to the collective self-esteem of African

Americans was to disprove white supremacist mythology, Robinson served to exemplify that not only were African Americans capable of competing against whites but also could compete alongside them on the same team. Americans accepted the bashing of white supremacy by the feats of Louis and Owens to the extent that those racist notions were associated with America's foreign rivals. With the admission of Jackie Robinson into the major leagues, America was called to face its own segregationist policies. However, the token integration of major league baseball provided European Americans with the conscience-soothing illusion that "racial progress" was being made.

Unlike Jack Johnson who eschewed America's views regarding the appropriate decorum for African American men, Louis, Owens, and Robinson conscientiously projected the image of men worthy of acceptance of mainstream America despite their ethnic affiliation. As noted earlier, because of Johnson's image (which was embarrassing to whites), Euro-American promoters, managers, and writers took an active role in shaping the images of Johnson's sports hero antecedents, particularly in the case of Joe Louis. Even after their sports careers had ended, Louis,

Owens, and Robinson served as spokespersons for American patriotism. All three men would be called upon to contradict, and more accurately, to condemn the behavior of the man who would use his position as an African American sports icon to confound America's ideals regarding "the place" of African American athletes.

By the 1960s, African American boxers dominated the prizefighting game. Thus, the nature of representation changed. There was no single African American fighter who represented "the race" by defeating "great white hopes." However, the career of Muhammad Ali was preceded by a history of symbolic attachment to prominent sports figures particularly with regard to so-called racial politics.

As discussed in Chapter Five, Jack Johnson and Joe Louis were assigned the role of representative of African America despite the desire of either to be representatives. Two sports figures who willingly embraced the burden of representation were prizefighter, Floyd Patterson, and Jackie Robinson. Both of these men were seen as representations of what Euro-America perceived as the ideal "Negro"--examples of the success that American opportunity was capable of producing. In fact, Robinson's potential as

representative was of primary concern when he was chosen to integrate the major leagues. Branch Rickey, the force behind baseball's integration project chose Robinson, not because he was the most athletically talented among the Negro Leaguers, but because he was articulate and college-educated (Ashe 10). As the will of the Euro-American mainstream would demand, Patterson and Robinson championed the interests of "party-line" American liberalism.

As a popular culture figure who faced political repercussions for transcending prescribed role expectations to his own personal detriment, Muhammad Ali has only one historical antecedent. Though an athlete, Ali's forerunner did not achieve his fortune through sport. Paul Robeson's prestige as a renowned singer and theatrical performer in film and stage was compromised by his challenge to European cultural and political hegemony. Prefiguring, Ali's one-time spiritual mentor, Malcolm X, Robeson was among the first to propose petitioning the United Nations regarding the violation of human rights of African Americans by the United States. More than a decade before Ali would face public and professional scrutiny for his refusal to participate in the Vietnam War, Robeson was professionally

persecuted for his advocacy of non-participation of African Americans in wars for the United States.

A man of Imhotepian talents, Paul Robeson was also an athlete, playing college football, baseball, and doing a short stint as a professional football player to finance his law school education. Like Ali, Robeson was a self-conscious representative of what he perceived were the interests of his people. While Ali's strength was in his wit, creative bravado and dramatic flare, Robeson's was his sophistication. Robeson was uncompromisingly vocal on behalf of oppressed Africans in the United States and on the African continent.

Ali and Robeson were subjected to professional persecution. That is, the State Department and industry heads dissolved both men's means of making a living in their respective careers. Just as Muhammad Ali was stripped of his license to box, Robeson's concert engagements were routinely canceled; and he was blackballed from the entertainment industry. As would be the case with Ali, Robeson was stripped of his passport and thus cut off from performance opportunities abroad.

The fate of Paul Robeson, as well as that of Garvey, Du Bois, King, Malcolm X, is illustrative of a historical tendency of the United States to neutralize any remonstrance among African Americans that could be perceived as threatening to the international interests of the United States. For each of these men, vilification by mainstream America peaked at the time when they were most vocal regarding matters of international dimension. While each may have been considered a political nuisance while decrying the civil rights violations of African Americans, once he ventured into issues beyond the borders of the United States he was labeled an enemy of the state. It is not a matter of coincidence that the political or physical demise of these men occurred shortly thereafter. For instance, while Martin Luther King was the subject of intense FBI surveillance throughout his career as a political activist, it was when he began his scrutiny of U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the Vietnam War that he was identified by the State Department as a "threat to national security." Given this context, one can understand the seriousness of the most recognizable world figure Muhammad

Ali's Vietnam stance and the logic behind the United States' response to it.

The distinction of Robeson and Ali from the many political activists who sought to represent the interests of African Americans (in most cases endangering themselves to do so) is that as figures of mainstream popular culture the two men had enjoyed prestige and fortune as stars in their respective fields. Reifying Du Bois' words perhaps more than others, these men by identifying with the African masses jeopardized their affiliation with the American mainstream. In the cases of Robeson and Ali, the stance of each man is marked by a risk more extreme than that of career activists. Concerning the latter, Kwame Toure (formerly Stokely Carmichael) noted, "of all the people who opposed the Vietnam War . . . Muhammad Ali risked the most" (qtd. in Hauser 1996, 71).

The transformation of sports hero, Cassius Clay, into the politically self-conscious cultural hero, Muhammad Ali, was facilitated by the African American struggle for self-definition and liberation during the sixties, particularly, the popularity of the Nation of Islam resulting from the leadership of Malcolm X.

The conflict between Floyd Patterson and Muhammad Ali represented a clash of the integrationist and nationalist political orientations. Farrad observes the political symbolism of the Ali-Patterson bout:

Although Patterson was mainly a reflection of his moment and Ali an iconoclastic shaper of his, the 1965 fight stands as confrontation between two boxers whose conceptions of themselves as black men owed much to their historical context. Coming to athletic prominence in the early years of the civil rights movement, Patterson adopted those mid-1950s principles and that political paradigm as his own. Patterson's idea of radical opposition was to drink at a whites-only water fountain in the South and to pronounce the water egalitarian—it tasted the same as that a segregated facility. (176-77)

The rise of the nationalist Ali and his eclipsing of the patriotic African American athlete of Patterson's ilk paralleled the non-violent integrationist movement of the "old guard" giving way to a newer generation advocating self-defense and Black Power. Ali's affirmation of identity, vividly dramatized by his insistence on being called by his adopted name, was analogous to the concern with cultural distinctiveness of the Black Power advocates and sympathizers. Moreover, this reclamation of African identity was illustrated by anti-colonial movements on the African continent occurring during the same period.

Ali's membership in the Nation of Islam (NOI) was arguably the factor that most impacted his relationship with both the masses of African American people and the American mainstream. His affiliation with the Nation was integral to his identity and his self-creation as a cultural folk hero.

The NOI contributed to his image making in several ways. Ali found his spiritual base in the Islamic religion as taught by Elijah Muhammad. Secondly, Ali received his name from Messenger Muhammad. Lastly, through his association with the Nation, Ali earned an identity that excluded him politically and theologically from the American mainstream and placed him among the most marginalized of African American people.

Though Malcolm X was not, as was commonly believed, the person who recruited Clay into the Nation (Hauser 91), he was the first to realize the potential value of his membership in the Nation. Moreover, Malcolm, comparing Clay to his most immediate heroic predecessor, accurately foresaw the significant impact Ali would have as a hero for the African American masses:

Cassius will mean more to his people than any athlete before him. He's more than Jackie

Robinson was, because Robinson is the white man's hero. But Cassius is the black man's hero.
(qtd. in Horn 57)

Recognizing Clay's potential as an icon for the African world, Malcolm carefully nurtured his protégé in preparation for his role. He served as Ali's spiritual adviser and introduced him to representatives of African nations at the United Nations. Ali was to accompany Malcolm X on a tour of the African continent. Ali's apprenticeship to Malcolm was short-lived due to the conflict that raged between Malcolm and national leadership of the NOI, and which ultimately led to Malcolm's death. The champion was also a prize in the power struggle between Malcolm X and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad Ali, who owes much of his creation to the influence of both men, was torn between them (Branch 251, Evanzz175).

Cassius Clay's place in the midst of the conflict of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad set the circumstances under which he was named Muhammad Ali. Typically, a follower of Elijah Muhammad was given an "original" Arabic name only after years of devoted service. However, Elijah Muhammad named Cassius Clay Muhammad Ali within weeks of the championship victory. Malcolm saw the naming as an obvious

ploy to keep the champion from leaving the Nation of Islam with Malcolm (Branch 251).

Ali's acceptance and defense of his new name would be a prominent motif in his epic career. That name symbolizes Ali's right to self-definition and, on a larger scale, African America's struggle to define itself by its own terms.

The rift between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad to a large degree has its roots in the differing political philosophies of the two men. Muhammad taught that the political, social, and economic betterment of African Americas would be accomplished through spiritual self-reformation via the embracing of Islam (albeit a group-specific contemporary interpretation of Islam). According to Muhammad's ideology, direct confrontation with European Americans was unnecessary, as Allah would bring final judgement against the "white devil." Malcolm was uncomfortable with this "wait on God" conservatism.

Though he accepted Elijah Muhammad's interpretation of the social condition of African Americans in religious terms, Malcolm shared with Martin King the notion that the value of any religion lay in its capacity to challenge

injustice. Malcolm felt that the Nation, who would not be reluctant to defend against hostile whites, would be a formidable presence if mobilized to participate in civil rights demonstrations. He also was concerned with building political alliances with African and other non-European people throughout the world to confront European world domination. Ultimately, Malcolm's radicalism (i.e., his proclivity towards political confrontation) was incompatible with Elijah Muhammad's conservatism.

The contrasting philosophies of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X were evident in the way that each man viewed Muhammad Ali's symbolic importance. Malcolm's interest in Cassius Clay was based on the potential of the boxer to be vehicle of empowerment for African people throughout the world. Elijah Muhammad saw the fighter as a representative of the faith of Islam (Marquess 90). It should be noted the Elijah Muhammad's interest in Clay was belated, coming after Clay won the championship and publicly declared his affiliation with the Nation of Islam.

Muhammad Ali can be viewed as an amalgam of Malcolm's radicalism and Elijah Muhammad's conservatism. Just as Louis and Johnson provided the African American masses

vicarious empowerment by physically beating white men, Ali could symbolically confront the mainstream establishment within the innocuous confines of the sports world. It matters not that his opponents were usually African American in that Ali managed, through his rhetoric and interpretation of their character, to fashion them into anti-progressive icons of the mainstream.

To an extent, the creation and growth of Ali was a byproduct of the evolution of the Nation of Islam. In the truest sense, Ali was a typical mainstreamer within the Nation. As Cassius Clay, while in the peculiar position of an unofficial member who was not determined to be less a liability than an asset, Ali received tutelage from the NOI's estranged spokesman, Malcolm X. Once in the fold his loyalty centered on the officially prevailing rulership. That is, he was unquestionably allied with Elijah Muhammad rather than Malcolm X and upon the Messenger's death supported the succession of Wallace Muhammad, who ironically transformed the Nation's doctrine to one that was in agreement with Malcolm's religious, if not political, ideology.

One wonders what Ali would have become had he continued his apprenticeship with Malcolm. Clearly, there is evidence that suggests that Malcolm was heading into a more politically confrontational direction (which, as mentioned, was one of the factors behind his leaving the Nation).

In Hauser's oral history, Ali says that it turned out that the Nation eventually "went [Malcolm's] way," (111-112) referring to the transformation of the Nation of Islam to the World Community of Al-Islam in the West under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad's son, Warith Deen Mohamed. However, while the World Community of Al-Islam embraced Sunni Islam as Malcolm had, its deemphasis of political agitation was far different from Malcolm's philosophy.

What Ali lost due to his separation from Malcolm X, was what the Nation of Islam itself lost. While Elijah Muhammad masterfully created the mythos and practical lessons that formed the foundation of the organization, Malcolm reinforced the mythos with an acute sense of historical analysis and political strategy. Malcolm's absence retarded the development of the Nation of Islam and limited the intellectual growth of Muhammad Ali.

One can reasonably argue that Malcolm's counsel would have prevented Ali from making poor political decisions that diminished his position as an advocate for the interests of African people. Among the decisions that nearly compromised Ali from the standpoint of national consciousness was his consideration of accepting a fight in South Africa and his endorsement of Ronald Reagan for President.¹ Certainly, billing the Foreman fight in Zaire as the "Rumble in the Jungle" and even fighting in country ruled by a CIA backed dictator would have been questionable given Malcolm's influence.²

Ali's affiliation with the Nation of Islam helped to improve the degree of financial security for boxers within the prizefighting business. Due to the management of Herbert Muhammad (one of Elijah's sons), one of Ali's most tangible legacies to his posterity was his setting a precedence for boxers being paid a substantial portion of

¹ Ali's endorsement of Reagan was shocking given that while Governor of California, Reagan said that the "draft-dodger" Ali would never fight in his state.

² Malcolm X had been among the first to maintain that the CIA participated in the assassination of Congolese President Patrice Lumumba and hand-picked Mobutu Sese Seko to rule the country (later named Zaire) in his place. History confirmed Malcolm's accusation. (Evanzz 98-116)

the purse generated by matches. Nevertheless, Ali's most meaningful contribution was that he used his position as a world heavyweight champion to articulate what he perceived to be the sentiments of his people.

Ali's transformation of boxing, particularly regarding the power relations between boxers and management, parallels the transformation of predominantly European universities during the movement for Black Studies in the sixties. That movement was carried out by black nationalists who sought to carve out a piece of the university for their own control. The Black Power movement at these universities is the most vivid example of the coinciding of integrationist and nationalist tendencies. They involved the integrationists' concern to gain access to white controlled resources and the nationalists' emphasis on the promotion of African culture, group solidarity, and the exclusion of Euro-American input in defining interests.

Many social theorists perceive being an intellectual as primary means by which one gains entrance into higher class status. Particularly during the recent history of African Americans, the means by which many African

Americans most conspicuously rise in class status (insofar as class status is affiliated with economic status) is through the performance fields of entertainment or sports. In a political environment that allowed few opportunities for representation, sports offered the greatest opportunity, and perhaps burden, for African Americans to be representative. The star athlete has a unique position which makes him identifiable with the common masses, even those whom he surpasses according to economic class. Given the entirety of the history of the African American athlete, the masses identify with the sports hero more than the hero identifies with the masses. The convergent influences of Black Nationalism and African American folk culture on the stage of American popular culture allowed Muhammad Ali to emerge as an exception.

CHAPTER FOUR

VERNACULAR WARRIOR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RHETORIC AND VERSE OF MUHAMMAD ALI

Ali was fluent in English in a way we hadn't seen. His speech was sweet, and it had a melody; he almost sang when he spoke. "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" -- those words were the most famous rap lyrics ever.

Darryl McDaniel of Run-DMC

Aside from its tendency toward denigration, much discussion of the language of African Americans suffers from almost exclusive emphasis on grammatical form. The overemphasis on syntax, lexicon, and morphology in the defining of African American language (commonly referred to as "Ebonics") presents a problem with regard to classification. This myopic view eliminates from the discussion of African American language, rhetors like Frederick Douglass, Martin King, and Malcolm X who do not employ the most commonly observed grammatical forms of African American speech.

In discussing Muhammad Ali within the context of African American language use, one must avoid such a narrow

focus. That Ali's language uses the most distinctive (and stigmatized) African American grammatical structures is evident in his most memorable aphorism regarding his Vietnam War stance: "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong." However, the placing of Ali's orature in the center of African American language discourse is justified by more than just rudimentary concerns with grammar. I would dare argue that any rewarding discussion relative to African American language use must be concerned with function as well as form, and necessitates an examination of the ethos which informs both.

The metalinguistic concerns and social functioning of language are central to the cultural distinction of African American English. This point is suggested by Asante (1993) in his essay "The African Essence of African American Language." He writes:

the relationship between African languages and African-American speech behavior can be more clearly ascertained on a primary level in the "communication style" of the person. While this is a difficult concept to define, it means simply the verbal and nonverbal behavior patterns that distinguish one person from another. In fact, whole groups may be distinguished in such a manner. On a secondary level, there are observable relationships in the substantive social fabric of language behavior, i.e., proverbs, riddles, dozens, and call-and-response.

The combination of the communicative styles and "folkloric modalities" constitutes an approach to the sense of a language. It is in this sense that language in Afro-America is uniquely more African than European, other factors aside.
(236)

Given the supra-segmental concerns with language that Asante suggests, discourse relative to the spoken word must be multifaceted in its focus. This discussion of Ali's oral artistry, then, deals with two broad aspects: the inherent cultural characteristics of his spoken word and the methodology consciously employed in his rhetoric. My thesis follows the premise suggested by Geneva Smitherman that the African American oral tradition is one in which "verbal performance becomes both a way of establishing 'yo rep' as well as a teaching and socializing force" (204).

Karenga (1980) makes a distinction between art of "popular culture" and art of "national culture." According to his analysis popular culture is politically unconscious while national culture is politically self-conscious (18). That distinction delineates the difference between the verbal strategies of the folk oral artist and the rhetoric of confrontational African American discourse. Ali's artistry extends into both spheres, at times, blurring the

boundaries between the two as Ali applies political function to folk practice.

This chapter will explore Ali's use of verbal culture with which he is intuitively familiar as well as his conscious strategy for rhetorical effect. While folk oral artists, whether common folk on street corners or rap artists in recording studios, make use of such devices, like the poets of the black arts movement, Ali uses rituals of common verbal culture as a consciousness raising project. That is, he, even while operating within the realm of popular culture, self-consciously uses his art to convey a sense of national consciousness.

Muhammad Ali's persona is part of the legacy of African American culture, particularly verbal culture, and political consciousness. Ali constructs himself as a vernacular warrior honed by the Black Nationalism of the Nation of Islam and fashioned in the tradition of the African American folk hero. The vernacular of African American verbal culture is the means by which he carries out his self-construction. That is, his rhetorical methodology is structured from the dynamics of African/African American verbal culture. In his oral

performances he reflects the use of the word as empowerment. Ali's orature, conveyed via sound bites, poetry, interviews, and speeches, works in conjunction with, and independent of, his athletic performances to create a persona of mythic proportions which influenced the political, social, and moral consciousness of Africana peoples. Like the folk hero mythoforms, the trickster and the "bad nigger," through wit and rhetorical skill, this persona confronts and seeks to subvert the postulations of the dominant culture.

One aspect of African American verbal culture prominent in the persona of Ali is the practice of "signifying". Based on the vast number of uses of the term "signifying" by its practitioners and scholars, I define signifying as the various forms of stylized evocative speech which include boasts, toasts, storytelling, and "the dozens," during which the speaker performs as well as communicates. Signifying is always a means of influencing an audience. Signifying evokes feelings and/or provokes behavior. The signifier may seek to garner support from listeners or taunt, attack, or rebut an enemy. Thus, Ali's signifying can be divided in to two categories--promotional

and combative. Ali's performance of poetry was his means of promoting himself and his fights. While his rhetorical attacks against boxing opponents were also a part of his performance persona and his promotional campaign, they were also valuable for their combative function.

At times, examples of Ali's orature can be described as less "rhetorical" than others. The difference lies in the purpose of the verbal strategy. By rhetoric, I mean the practice of communication as a means to define and defend group interests. In a word, it is the use of language as a tool for empowerment as embodied in the concept of *Nommo*. While some acts of signifying may be personally empowering, the signifier may not necessarily be consciously representative of group interests. In that instance, for our purposes that act of signification would not be considered rhetorical.

There has been limited discussion on signifying that precedes the American experience. Gates, however, argues for a linking of the features and figures of signifying with African antecedents and diasporic parallels. Gates indicates a lineage of signifying from Esu Elegbara, a divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythos that has

manifestations with different names in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and the Voudun lore of the United States. Specifically, Gates argues a connection between the "signifying monkey" and the Esu Elegba because of "their functional equivalency as figures of rhetorical strategies and of interpretation" (53).

A predominant characteristic of signifying is its transformative capacity. Like the African trickster archetype, the signifier in African American discourse utilizes the power of the spoken word to create circumstances that facilitate the fulfillment of his will. Ali changed the fight game into one that resembled that of the "signifying monkey," that is, one that revolved around the mastery of wit and words. In Ali's world being "talked about" (what common "slanguage" refers to as "being dissed") was as bad as being punched in the prize ring. Ali's opponents were not the only targets of his verbal wit; he also verbally battled commentators who disagreed with his self-assessment or made predictions of the outcome of his fights that did not favor him.

Ali's orature consists of his poetry and the rhetoric disseminated through interviews, speeches, and verbal

confrontations. The forums for his oral literature are his encounters with the press, which, though antagonistic toward Ali, was his outlet to the public. Even in the absence of the press, Ali performed whenever there were people around him

Ali's verbal acumen provides examples of the verbal culture of African Americans. That is, he utilizes verbal strategies that are a part of common usage of the language ritualized among African Americans. Evelyn B. Dandy, in her book *Black Communication*, defines verbal strategies as "the highly stylized use of words and gestures to impress, persuade, or control the audience" (75). The forms of expression that these verbal strategies assume may vary. Such verbal activity may be manifested in musical forms such as rap and blues music or spoken forms such as poetry, storytelling, and conversational settings. The three verbal strategies that dominate Ali's oral artistry are boasting, toasting, and woofing. Boasting and toasting are forms of poetic adulation that Ali uses for self-promotion; woofing is an art of verbal confrontation that is employed to gain a psychological edge over an opponent. These verbal strategies are the means by which Ali bonds with his

audience, fashions his heroic persona, and confronts his enemies.

A constant in folk literature is adaptability. In an essay on African oral artistry, Samuel Boadu states that "the test of a true oral artist is to use and change words according to the dictates of situations and circumstances" (84). Ali's oral artistry illustrates this morphological tendency. Not only does Ali revise and adapt older poems for different settings, he also adapts traditional forms of African American orature for the newer terrain of popular media. For example, typically, toasts and boasts of the African American oral tradition, the most direct antecedents of modern rap music, are replete with obscenities and place extreme emphasis on the sexual conquests of the protagonists. However, because he was a self-conscious role model and because the television and the mainstream press provided the media upon which he relied to market himself, necessarily, Ali's toasts and boasts would be obscenity-free. Moreover, the brief interviews with television journalists did not allow for poems of substantial length; thus, Ali tended to perform limericks instead of longer boasts and toasts.

Like Esu as described in the Yoruba tale *Oriki Esu* as "he who says so and does so," (Gates 7) Ali proves his "greatness" by his ability to predict his victories over his opponents. Many of Ali's press conferences and interviews would involve a tirade of boasting that, like his campaigns before his other fights, would be interspersed with predictions of the fight's outcome in the form of limericks such as the following:

He knows I'm great. He went to school; he's no fool. I predict that he will go in eight to prove that I'm great; and if he wants to go to heaven, I'll get him in seven. He'll be in a worser fix if I cut it to six. And if he keeps talking jive, I'll cut it to five. And if he makes me sore, he'll go like Archie Moore, in four. And if that don't do, I'll cut it to two. And if he run, he'll go in one. And if he don't want to fight, he should keep his ugly self home that night. (qtd. in Hauser 61)

Boasts, a verbal art form that is foundational to rap music, are poetic testimonials written or expressed in the first person that affirm the "baadness" of the speaker. Boasting has often been described as an expression of masculinity. More accurately, boasting is an expression of prowess and superiority rooted in the boaster's sense of sexual identity. Thus, male boosters brag about killing male rivals and making sexual conquests, while female boast

artists, particularly blues singers, laud their ability to "take every woman's man."¹ Gender identity is most obvious in the most contemporary examples of boasting - rap music. The verses of earlier boasts differ from the lyrics of hip-hop music in its description of preternatural talents of the speaker/subject. This excerpt from a boast by the former H. Rap Brown is an example:

I'm the man who walked the water and tied the
whale's tail in a knot
Taught the little fishes how to swim
Crossed the burning sands and shook the devil's
hand
Rode 'round the world on the back of a snail
carrying a sack saying AIR MAIL. (355)

In Leon Gast's Oscar-winning documentary, *When We Were Kings* (1996), one of Ali's boasts preceding his fight to regain the championship from George Foreman in Zaire is recorded. In the opening lines, Ali attacks Tarzan, an American popular culture icon infamous for its inherent racism:

Last night I had a dream
When I got to Africa, I had one hell of a rumble
I had to beat Tarzan's behind first for claiming
to be the King of the Jungle ...²

¹This is excerpted from Rosetta Howard's "Rosetta's Blues," quoted in Ian Lang's *Jazz in Perspective* (1947).

² During his college speaking tours, Ali would customarily speak about the symbols of white superiority in American

As in the aforementioned Rap Brown example, in this boast Ali depicts himself as a superhuman capable of battling animals and subduing the elements of nature itself:

For this fight, I wrassled with alligators
 I've tussled with a whale
 I done handcuffed lightning
 And put thunder in jail (qtd. in When We Were Kings (WWWK), videocassette, 1996)

While personifying the objects of his manipulation he, again, transfigures himself into a superhuman persona not unlike John Henry, the steel-drivin' man.

What is most crafty in this piece is the use of ironic hyperbole. This literary device is exemplified in the lines "I could drown a drink of water" and "make medicine sick." The following verses contain examples of ironic hyperbole and of Ali's propensity for battering lithic matter:

You know I'm bad
 I have murdered a rock
 I injured a stone and I hospitalized a brick
 I'm so bad I make medicine sick.
 I'm so fast, man, I can run through a hurricane
 and don't get wet
 When George Forman meets me he'll pay his debt
 I can drown a drink of water and kill a dead tree

culture mentioning that "even Tarzan, the King of the Jungle in black Africa is white."

Wait till you see Muhammad Ali!

Typically, Ali's boasts were identical in form to other African American boasts and toasts. Rhythm is crucial in African American orature as the blending of appropriate vocal rhythms helps to assure a totally interactive audience (Asante 1987, 92). Rhythmically, Ali's boast adhered to the traditional rhyme scheme (aa/bb/cc) as other poems of the genre. Interspersed throughout the boast is a non-rhyming verse that offsets the rhythm. An example from the aforementioned "Rumble in the Jungle" boast is the line "You know I'm bad." The verse interrupts the poem's normal rhythm and serves as a vocal indentation. The function of such verses is to add a conversational or sometimes a prosaic tone to the poem, which in turn creates a greater degree of intimacy between performer and audience. Thus, the boast is rendered as conversation as well as poetry and performance of toasts becomes more like storytelling. Such pauses in rhythmic flow also presents opportunities for encouraging responses

from the audience (i.e., "That's right," "Yeah, you bad," etc.).³

As described by Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis (325), African American toasts are sometimes long oral epic poems. The most memorable of Ali's poems is a toast in which he describes the eighth round of his championship bout with Sonny Liston based on his prediction. In this toast Clay creates himself as a heroic character who like other toast heroes John Henry, Shine, and Dolemite possesses superhuman prowess. Showing attention to appropriate modality, the poem is told in the voice of a sports broadcaster. The poem is laden with hyperbolic imagery, an earmark of the traditional toast:

Now Clay swings with a right
What a beautiful swing
And the punch raises the bear
Clear out of the ring
Liston is still rising
And the ref wears a frown
For he cannot start counting
Till Sonny comes down (qtd. in Hauser 62)

As this excerpt indicates, Clay creates himself as a super man capable of knocking his opponent into orbit. In that regard, he bears resemblance to other toast characters

³ While performing toasts, oral artist Rudy Ray Moore would customarily punctuate his stanzas with "I ain't lying" or

like, John Henry, who outmines a steam drill engine, and Shine who outswims a shark by "turning his ass like a motorboat." Typically, the hero of such toasts conquers the unconquerable with superhuman powers.

This poem was a part of Ali's public relations performance before the bout that shaped the fight into a major event that it would not have otherwise been, given the degree to which Liston was expected to win. (Ali was a seven-to-one underdog.) It provided for sports writers a preview of what would become the most colorful career of any athlete. Moreover, his boasting before the press laid the groundwork for the adversarial relationship between Ali and Euro-American society as represented by the mainstream press.

While the poem is filled with exaggeration, the closing verses ("Yes, the crowd did not dream/When they lay down their money/That they would see/ A total eclipse of the Sonny") turned out to be prophetic in a literal way. The reputation of Liston, who was perceived as the most fearsome heavyweight, would be completely obscured, not only by an upset victory by a brash newcomer, but by a

"This some good shit I'm tellin.'"

personality that would capture the imagination and indignation of the American public within weeks of the fight.

In his verbal exchanges with many of his boxing opponents, Ali exemplifies the use of the spoken word as a means of competitive sparring. The combative forms of signifying include "woofin'" and the practice of verbal jousting often referred to as "the dozens." "Woofin'" or "selling woof tickets" is the practice of bluffing one's antagonist with threatening words or gestures. One of the most memorable examples of woofin' preceded the Clay - Liston championship bout. During the weigh-in, a ritual in professional boxing that serves more as a pre-fight publicity event than a record keeping routine, Ali (then Cassius Clay) created a spectacle that has become boxing legend. Biographer Thomas Hauser describes the event:

Clay reentered the weigh-in room. Two minutes later, Liston appeared, and the challenger seemingly went wild. "I'm ready to rumble now," he screamed.. " I can beat you anytime, chump! Somebody's gonna die at ringside tonight! You scared chump! You ain't no giant! I'm gonna eat you alive!" Bundini was shrieking, "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." Dundee, Robinson, and William Faversham were holding on to Clay, who seemed ready to attack Liston at any moment.

(70)

Clay's blood pressure rose to such a level during his performance that the official fight doctor threatened to cancel the fight. Observers from the press who were unfamiliar with this ritual thought that Ali's hysteria was a result of intense fear. His histrionics accomplished its intended effect on the champion; Liston was convinced that he was about fight a crazy man.

Ali's performance was a classic demonstration of woofin', the primary function of which is to give the signified the impression that the signifier is "badder" than he. The weigh-in episode was almost a re-enactment of traditional African American folktale involving a fight contest between two enslaved Africans. In that tale, John, the smaller but more cunning fighter defeats his hulking and fearsome opponent psychologically using theatrics rather than martial skill⁴. In the presence of his adversary John kisses his slavemaster's daughter. The brute runs off in terror in the other direction because he knows better than to fight "a nigger that crazy." Just as the brute was frightened by the enslaved African who had to

⁴This story was first related to me by my father years ago. A version of the tale appears in the film *Gullah Tales*, directed by Gary Moss (Direct Cinema, 1987)

be deranged to violate a taboo of a Euro-dominated society, Liston was disturbed by the young Clay who was obviously crazy to disturb the decorum of the usually solemn weigh-in ritual.

Employing the power of *Nommo*, Clay shaped reality through the spoken word by announcing to Liston that he was scared. By also telling Liston that he was "no giant," he made an affirmation that Liston was as vulnerable as any man and that the unbeatable brute he was made out to be was merely a figment of the press' imagination.

Ali's signifying with Liston as his foil was in essence a psychological war campaign against the champion. Ali's explanation of the logic behind his campaign against Liston makes this point:

Everyone predicted that Sonny Liston would destroy me. And he was scary. But it's lack of faith that makes people afraid of meeting challenges, and I believed in myself. I was confident I could whup him. So what I did was, I studied his style, I trained hard, and I watched Liston outside the ring. I went to his training camp and tried to understand what went on inside his head, so later on I could mess with his mind. *And all the time, I was talking, talking.* That way, I figured Liston would get so mad that when the fight came, he'd try to kill me and forget everything he knew about boxing. (qtd in Hauser 60) [Emphasis mine.]

Like woofin', the verbal strategy referred to often as "the dozens" is a combative rhetorical form. Ali's exchange of insults with opponents and media personalities offers vivid examples of this verbal sparring ritual. His oratorical bouts with his opponents were clearly reflective of the rules governing verbal contesting among African Americans. As scholarly observers of the dozens and practitioners such as H. Rap Brown have pointed out, victory in verbal combat is achieved when one's opponent becomes angry enough to fight (25). The challenge facing the participants in "the dozens" is to exchange verbal insults without becoming unsettled by being insulted. Clearly, for many of Ali's opponents, their first loss was psychological, resulting from being unnerved by Ali's creative verbal abuse.

Mollete and Mollete (172) offer that a typical practice of the folk hero, particularly, the trickster, is the use of verbal diplomacy with comic irony. Ali often used humor to undermine the seriousness of confrontational settings. When the New York legislature proposed legislation to outlaw boxing in that state because of the prevalence of corruption, it called Ali (then Cassius Clay)

to testify⁵. Clay's predicting of the outcomes of his fight led the legislature to suspect that he was involved in fight "fixes." Clay took the inquisition as a performance opportunity. He told his interrogator that he had predicted that his upcoming fight against Doug Jones would end in a sixth round knockout and asked: "If Jones goes in six you gonna say it's a fix?" Clay's use of wit demonstrated the spontaneity that is highly valued in African verbal culture (Miruka 89).

Undoubtedly, the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam has influenced the voice of Muhammad Ali. It should be understood, however, that despite the Nation's influence on Ali, Ali as an oral artist and folk hero, is more than simply an extension of the Nation. In his analysis of the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, Morrison notes the Nation's employment of mythication as a rhetorical strategy (67). While speaking in his capacity as a minister for the Nation, Ali certainly expounded upon those mythic forms. However, in the shaping of his public character, he more often utilized mythoforms of traditional African American heroic folklore, such as the trickster, the "bad nigger,"

⁵ An excerpt from the hearing is recorded in the

and the culture hero (see Chapter Three). Nevertheless, as a political figure by virtue of his identity as a Muslim of the Nation of Islam, Ali employed many rhetorical devices characteristic of Black Nationalist discourse.

Many scholars have observed the "ego-function" of the rhetoric of African American social movements. According to Smith (34), many African American rhetors see that the redefining of self as crucial to the development of national identity. Stewart et al. state that such rhetoric serves to help social movements "alter self-perceptions of members and non-members so they will come to believe in their self-worth and ability to achieve urgent change through collective actions" (54).

In his analysis of the rhetoric of Black Power, Gregg notes that ego function is exemplified in discourse "wherein one's self is his [or her] primary audience [and which] maintains and affirms that 'self-hood' of an individual as he or she engages in a rhetorical act" (74). Ali's signature affirmation, "I am the Greatest," is suspected of being a self-defining declaration directed to his audience and also to himself. One of his opponents,

documentary, *Ali: The Whole Story*.

Floyd Patterson believed this to be so. He told one writer, "I always knew that all of [Ali's] bragging was a way to convince himself that he could do what he said he'd do. . . .It took me a long time to understand who [Ali] was talking to. [Ali] was talking to [Ali]" (qtd. in Remnick 149).

Malcolm X's comment that mainstream America feared Ali's proclamation of greatness would encourage other African Americans to believe in their own self-worth (Horn 157) suggests that Ali's bragging is a means by which the self-perception of African Americans can be improved. Ali's self-praise, which is prevalent throughout his orature, is his most obvious demonstration of mythication as a rhetorical strategy. That is, in his declaration of his greatness he grants himself mythical stature making himself, as he often put it, "the black Superman." The Nation employs this same strategy in ascribing supranatural attributes to African Americans whom they affirmed were the Lost Tribe of Shabazz, Allah's chosen people.

Typical of the practice of mythication as a rhetorical strategy, particularly as a means enhancing the collective "ego" of the masses, is the use of the messianic idiom.

Asante (1987) suggests that the "messianic idiom is the most prevalent motive in radical black discourse." As Asante explains the "messiah is mission-oriented and feels a moral or supra-rational need to stand as the deliverer of the people" (127).

The evidence of the messianic motif in the persona of Ali is suggested by the comments of Drew "Bundini" Brown, Ali's corner man and "praise-singer" (see chapter 4) recorded in Leon Gast's documentary film on the Ali-Forman championship fight:

I say Muhammad [Ali] is a prophet. How you going to beat God's son? Anybody love little people and poor people got to be a prophet. He had big house and one for his mother. . . He told them to shove it if he couldn't worship his God. What you think he is, Mister?

The influence of messianism in the rhetoric of Ali may have begun with his affiliation with Malcolm X. In his autobiography, Malcolm X explains his use of doctrinal motivation to convince Ali of the inevitability of victory over the champion, Sonny Liston:

. . . I brought from New York with me some photographs of Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston in their fight camps, with white priests as their "spiritual advisors." Cassius Clay, being a Muslim, didn't need to be told how white Christianity had dealt with the American black man. "This fight is the truth," I told Cassius.

"It's the Cross and the Crescent fighting in a prize ring—for the first time. It's a modern Crusades—a Christian and a Muslim facing each other with television to beam it off Telstar for the whole world to see what happens!" I told Cassius, "Do you think Allah brought about all this intending for you to leave the ring as anything but the champion?" (Malcolm X 307)

Malcolm mentions that Ali incorporated this sense of divine destiny in his boastful assertions preceding that fight: "You may remember that at the weighing-in, Cassius was yelling such things as 'It is prophesied for me to be successful; I cannot be beaten!'" (307)

Another rhetorical strategy of the Nation of Islam was vilification. This practice involves the designation of the opposition as an evil other. This strategy serves the specific function of influencing the community's perception of the opposition. In the case of the Nation of Islam, the most typical example of vilification is the identification of the European as "the Devil."

Ali used various nicknames for his opponents that were not necessarily derogatory but certainly caricatured his adversaries. Liston was called "the Bear," because of his fierceness, Patterson "the Rabbit" because of his timidity, and Archie Moore "the Mummy" because of his age. The worse appellation was given to Joe Frazier, dubbed "the Gorilla"

because of his perceived unattractiveness. These names help to characterize Ali's opponents as subordinate to himself (i.e., less than "the greatest"). Here, Ali's signifying serves rhetorical function as it seeks to define reality by empowering him. Further, Ali makes use of the Nation of Islam's lexicon in his labeling of certain boxers "Uncle Tom," a designation the NOI reserved for African Americans ideologically opposed to them.

Often Ali seemed to vacillate between the usual humorous emphasis of the dozens and the urgency to define himself in an image of his choosing. Against two opponents, Ernie Terrell and Floyd Patterson, Muhammad Ali's playful ritual of the dozens escalated into something more serious—the defense of his honor as a Muslim. Both cases involved the refusal of his opponent to acknowledge Ali's adoption of a new name. While Ali attacked them verbally, as was his custom, he also punished both men in the ring by totally outclassing them.⁶

Of all of Ali's boxing opponents, the only one to consciously engage in a rhetorical battle with him was former champion, Floyd Patterson. Patterson zealously

assumed the role of a modern crusader representing Christianity and America in his bout with Ali. Patterson felt that it was his patriotic duty to defeat Ali and "bring the championship back to America." With the assistance of writer Jack Mahon, Patterson wrote an editorial declaring his mission to dethrone Ali (whom he insisted on calling by his former name, Clay) in the name of democracy and racial harmony:

The Black Muslim influence must be removed from boxing. I have been told Clay has every right to follow any religion he chooses, and I agree. But by the same token, I have the right to call the Black Muslims a menace to the United States and a menace to the Negro race. I have the right to say the Black Muslims stink. I am a Roman Catholic. I do not believe God put us here to hate one another. I believe the Muslim preaching of segregation, hatred, rebellion and violence is wrong. Cassius Clay is disgracing himself and the Negro race. No decent person can look up to a champion whose credo is "hate whites." I have nothing but contempt for the Black Muslims and that for which they stand. The image of a Black Muslim as the world heavyweight champion disgraces the sport and the nation. Cassius Clay must be beaten and the Black Muslims' scourge removed from boxing. (Patterson 81)

Ali retorted in typical verse:

I'm gonna put him flat on his back,
So that he will start acting black.

⁶ In each fight, Ali pummeled his opponent while shouting at him, "What's your name?"

Because when he was champ he didn't do as he should.

He tried to force himself into an all-white neighborhood. (qtd. in Hauser 139)

Ali was referring specifically to Patterson's buying a house in an all-white neighborhood only to leave when he learned he was not welcome. Some of Ali's verbal attacks included typical Nation of Islam rhetoric referring to Patterson as an "old dumb porkchop-eater."

He also called Patterson the "black white hope," an appropriate label, given that many Euro-Americans wanted Patterson to make good on his desire to "take the title away from Clay and the Black Muslims." While Patterson took umbrage at being called the "black white hope," he quite literally, though unwittingly, agreed with Ali's assessment. In the same essay in which he makes his patriotic vow to defeat Ali, he describes a "spiritually" moving moment in an earlier fight (with George Chuvalo) during which he earns the anointing of Euro-America:

I was very tired near the end of the fight, but inside-mentally, that is-I felt great. Part of it was the wonderful feeling I experienced when the Madison Square Garden crowd began calling, "Come on, Floyd. Come on, Floyd." I can't tell you what that meant to me. It was more impressive because my opponent was white. Usually in mixed fights the majority of the crowd is for the white boy. Weeks before my fight

Cassius Clay called Chuvalo the "White Hope."
But during the fight I became the "White Hope"
(Patterson 83).

Ali added injury to insult by giving Patterson what observers thought to be the cruelest and most humiliating beatings he had ever administered. Throughout the fight, Ali pummeled Patterson just enough to hurt him while being careful not to knock him out. All the while Ali shouted such taunts as: "Come on, American! Come on, white American!"

Other foils for Ali, were sports commentators, the most notable of which was Howard Cossell. Ali's exchanges with Howard Cossell were strictly for entertainment and mostly focused on sport while his arguments with others were often based as much on his politics.⁷ In response to Cossell's comments on his diminished talent and the unlikelihood of his winning against Foreman, Ali, pointing directly into the camera, said:

Howard Cossell, you said that "Muhammad Ali is not the same man he was three years ago." Well, I talked to your wife and she said you aren't the same man you were two years ago. (qtd. in *WWWK*)

⁷ Cossell was one of the first and few sports journalists who accepted Ali's name and defended Ali's right to religious and political expression.

The Patterson and Terrell fights were the only ones where Ali allowed anger to influence his performance.

However, Ali's signifying inspired no greater anger and animosity than it did with his greatest rival, Joe Frazier.

Nothing more abundantly reflects the ironic aspects of Ali's character and the irony inherent in African American culture--a culture plagued by what Du Bois called the double consciousness--as Ali's verbal assault which demeaned Joe Frazier. Ali's vituperation of Joe Frazier was considered the harshest and, with some justification, perceived as "anti-black." Initially, Ali provoked Frazier's ire by calling him "ignorant." At another time, Ali referred to Frazier, a product of the Gullah culture, as a "Geechee," a term often taken to be derogatory. The most searing of Ali's remarks came during the build-up for their third and final bout. Ali nicknamed Frazier "the Gorilla," a name with obvious racial overtones. However, the moniker was inspired more by oratorical aesthetics than malice. Ali-Frazier III was held in the Phillipines and billed (as a result of Ali's practice of self-promotion) as the "Thrilla in Manilla." Unfortunately for Frazier, "gorilla" fit neatly into Ali's rhyme scheme ("It's gonna

be a chillla and a thrilla when I get the Gorilla in Manilla!").

One should be aware that the self-degrading comments and practices, even those expressed in jest, are a result of the experience with American white supremacy. However, criticism that argues that Ali demonstrates a degree of self-hate by his insulting of his African American opponents is overblown. Such criticism does not take into account the commonality of self-deprecation within African American folk culture, the rules governing such practices as the "dozens," and the difference between the meanings that Euro-Americans and African Americans ascribe to epithets (i.e., "nigger"). For better or worse, self-deprecation is a constant within African American folk culture. Indeed, a standard refrain in the dozens is "your mama so black . . ."

One might find it ironic that member of the Nation of Islam would say anything derogatory regarding typical African features. However such remarks would be consistent with the attitude of the Nation's spiritual leader, Elijah Muhammad. In his biography on Muhammad, Clegg points out that Elijah Muhammad demonstrated a lack of sophistication

regarding Africa that was not unlike the perceptions of most African Americans who were largely ignorant of African indigenous culture.

As late as the 1970s, Muhammad believed that non-Islamic Africa was desperately in need of a "civilizing" influence. He was critical of the "near nude" African who was too "savage to hide his nakedness," and those who wore Afros and lived a "jungle life . . . the way you see in some uncivilized parts of Africa today." In addition to depicting "bushy hair [as] the style of the savages," Muhammad also denounced traditional African attire, languages, religions, and customs, which black Americans would supposedly "be degrading themselves to adopt." The Muslim leader believed that only African Muslims and educated Christians had risen above the level of barbarians; all others were benighted and without dignity. Similar to westernized black nationalists of the nineteenth century, Muhammad had a missionary complex regarding Africans. (Clegg 240)

Ali revealed a similar ignorance with regard to Africa as demonstrated by a public relations blunder that he made prior to his fight with George Forman in Kinshasha, Zaire. He told some of the reporters that he was going to tell Zaire's President Mobutu to put them in a pot and eat them for expressing doubt of Ali's abilities. His christening the event "the Rumble in the Jungle" also reflected his ignorance of Africa. (Ali's attitude toward Africa would be changed by his experience in Zaire.)

A less convincing argument of those who were chagrined by Ali's anti-Frazier rhetoric was the suggestion that because of his background Frazier was a better suited representative of African Americans. Many have observed in retrospect that Ali's labeling of Frazier as a dupe of the white establishment was unjustified given that Frazier arose from humbler beginnings than Ali had. However, Ali's taunts were not empty accusations for the sake of psychological warfare.

For many African American residents of Philadelphia, Frazier's hometown, the fact was not lost that Frazier endorsed representatives of an establishment perceived as antagonistic to African Americans. Frazier was a steadfast supporter of Mayor Frank Rizzo, who had earned a reputation during his years as police commissioner and as mayor for being a notorious racist. As police commissioner, Rizzo had ordered an attack by riot control police against African American demonstrators, mostly women and children who were protesting the racism of the curriculum in public schools. In the African American community, he is also remembered for his public strip search of Black Panther members in 1969 and his defense of police officers whose

abuse of MOVE member Delbert Africa were captured by television cameras. Thus, at least for many African American Philadelphians, Ali's labeling Frazier a "white man's champion" was not completely unwarranted as it was reflective of attitudes among many in the community.

Naturally, "Black-on-Black" insult arises as an issue because of Ali's effrontery in expressing before the world folk practices that many African Americans would prefer to keep in closed company. But indeed, it was his boldness in shamelessly exposing his identity with African American culture, particularly during a time when it was more acceptable to blend in with American mainstream culture, that enabled him to emerge as a cultural folk hero.

According to Asante (1987), often in the tradition of African American protest the rhetor "resists discourse limitations and creates new rhetorical ground" (116). Ali is unique in that he transcends the most restrictive discourse boundaries of the prize fighter who typically is expected to reserve his commentary to fighting (unless called upon to express his thanks for being born in America). Thus, Ali's demonstration of *Nommo* is what defined him and established his historical significance.

Muhammad Ali's means of forming and articulating an identity forged by a national consciousness was the verbal culture of African America. The practice of signifying was essential to the creation of the Ali persona. The import of Ali's utilization of this particular art form is that it provided a means of shaping his character as "the Greatest." The persona fashioned by such means serves to accomplish what the philosophies of Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad do: it affirms the full humanity of Africans in the midst of a society that argues their inferiority.

CHAPTER FIVE

BLACK SUPERMAN: MUHAMMAD ALI IN THE HEROIC TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ORATURE

The Black folk hero not only defies the system
and its mores, but he brags about his defiance at
the same time.

Daryl Cumber Dance--
Shuckin' and Jivin'

To understand Muhammad Ali as a folk hero in the African American tradition necessitates a discussion of the mythic prototypes of African American oral tradition, which inform his identity as such. Ali's use of language, archetypes, and values are reflective of and consistent with an African worldview as he shapes himself as a defender of his people's image and interest. By virtue of his conscious effort to represent the interest of African American people through the usage of African American cultural devices (i.e., African American orature models and verbal strategies), Muhammad Ali is the only athlete to emerge as an Afrocentric cultural hero.

In this chapter, I will examine the heroic mythoforms of the African and African American tradition that are foundational to the Ali persona. These include folkloric character types such as the trickster, the badman, and the culture hero. I will also discuss Ali's heroic predecessors, Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, and his distinction from them as an Afrocentric cultural hero.

Ali's creation of himself as an Afrocentric cultural hero incorporated aspects of the trickster, the badman, the culture hero. The African trickster is, perhaps, the most foundational to the heroic character in African American lore. Typically, African trickster figures were animal characters who demonstrated the ability to use wit and cunning, in lieu of brute strength or ferocity, to overcome obstacles or conquer opponents. Making "a way out of no way" is a skill of the African trickster evident in the trickster characters of displaced Africans in America and the Caribbean.

In his essay, "Trickster, the Revolutionary Hero," Ivan Van Sertima explains that

it is this capacity of the dream figure (animal archetype) to overleap and overturn an oppressive

social condition that makes the personae of the tales (rabbit, tortoise in black America, Annancy the Spider in the Caribbean) take on a heroic cast and revolutionary function. . . . This role reversal and revolutionary function of certain folk heroes accounts for their enormous popular appeal among the black communities of the New World. (106)

The rabbit and the turtle in tales from the Bantu culture were trickster characters who were typically underdogs relying on nimbleness and endurance, respectively, to achieve their ends (Van Sertima 105). Both of these attributes would figure prominently in the performance persona of Muhammad Ali.

In a sport mostly reliant on brawn, Ali would literally boast an ability to defeat brute strength with lightning speed. This is captured in Ali's signature phrase created by his corner man and unofficial morale coach, Drew "Bundini" Brown: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee; You can't hit what you don't see." The irony of using a butterfly, generally illustrative of grace and beauty, as a symbol for one's formidability as a

fighter is wholly consistent with the traits of African and African American irony and trickster figures.

With the development of the "bad nigger" or "badman" hero in African American lore comes the merging of real life experiences with creative license. While the African and African American trickster stories featured animal characters as heroes, the culture heroes and the badman heroes were men. Many of these characters were based upon real-life personalities (Levine 410, 421).

The badman violated all the moral and legal bounds of society. The badman character would typically be abusive and disrespectful to all. An inherent part of this character is stereotypical amorality, brutality, and extreme sexuality. While the badman mythoform may have inherited its proclivity for violating moral and social restrictions from the African trickster, its disposition for violence and misogyny is wholly consistent with American cultural sensibilities.

Unlike the heroes in most African American badman toasts, Ali was not excessively brutal and amoral, but he was "bad" enough to speak out on issues relative to the political and social castigation of African Americans,

something most athletes dared not do. Moreover, Ali's poetic style was based on the model of the badman toasts.

The connection between mythic character types and living individuals is not unusual. The badman characters like Stagolee, Shine, and Dolemite were inspired by legends surrounding real men. The same is true for culture hero, John Henry. Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, the first and second African American world heavyweight boxing champions, precede Ali as prizefighters that evolved into cultural icons and folk heroes with the African American oral tradition. Indeed, Ali's emergence as an Afrocentric culture hero sprang from a legacy left by Johnson and Louis.

Though Ali's heroic persona possessed some shadings of the badman character type, he was less a badman than the first boxer to become a culture hero, Jack Johnson. Jack Johnson embodied the characteristics of the badman by intent and the culture hero by default. Johnson enhanced his bad image by his unabashed exhibition of enjoyment while beating his opponents, and further by his fraternization and marriages with white women and his

reputation for disregarding minor traffic laws as typified in this anecdote:

It was on a hot day in Georgia when Jack Johnson drove into town. He was really flying: Zooooooom! Behind his fine car was a cloud of red Georgia dust as far as the eye could see. The sheriff flagged him down and said, "Where do you think you're going, boy, speeding like that? That'll cost you \$50." Jack Johnson never looked up; He just reached in his pocket and handed the sheriff a \$100 bill and started to gun the motor; Ruuummm, ruuummm. Just before Jack pulled off the sheriff shouted, "Don't you want your change?" And Jack replied, "Keep it, 'cause I'm coming back the same way I'm going!" (Wiggins 46)

Being the badman in the boxing ring, where he would demolish white men while smiling and taunting them, Johnson earned the enmity of European Americans and was adulated by African Americans as a culture hero. Johnson became the hero of African American folk tradition whose goal, Dance writes, "is to outsmart the Man, to humiliate him, to outperform him mentally verbally, physically, or sexually, and to force him to recognize and to respect him" (180).

As with all culture heroes, Jack Johnson's victories were considered victories for the African American community at-large. His win over Jim Jeffries would inspire this song that was heard in North Carolina:

Amaze an' Grace, how sweet it sounds,

Jack Johnson knocked Jim Jeffries down.
Jim Jeffries jumped up an' hit Jack on the Chin,
An' then Jack knocked him down agin.

The Yankees hold the play,
The white man pulls the trigger;
But it make no difference what the white man say,
The world champion's still a nigger. (Brewer
178).

In African American orature, the cultural hero represents the collective aspirations and sentiments of the people by challenging stereotypes and restriction imposed by white culture (Levine 420). A prototype for the culture hero in African American lore is John Henry the Steel Drivin' Man whose competition with a steam drill symbolizes a struggle of the African American working class against an industry-driven white society. Johnson, by winning and maintaining the championship at a time when the sport was dominated by white boxers, as would Joe Louis, inspired African Americans and angered European Americans by dispelling the notion of white superiority in all things.

While Johnson challenged behavioral restrictions the American society prescribed for African Americans outside the ring, and while his boxing performance belied notions of racial superiority of whites, he also strongly embraced certain stereotypical behaviors. The most notable of these

was his exploitation of the myth of black male sexual prowess, illustrated in no small way by his sexual preference for white women. That the Africa American male had an insatiable lust, and a particular longing for white women was reflected in a film which was popular during Johnson's time, D.W. Griffith's "classic" film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In a conscious effort to advertise sexual potency, Johnson was said to have wrapped cloth around his genital area to emphasize the bulge in his crotch. Johnson's personification of the myth of the black "stud" was part of an intentional effort to pique the ire of European Americans. Thus, he attacked the American mainstream by exploiting its own mythic stereotypes.

Johnson's depiction of himself as a sexual superman intensifies his identity as a mythic badman who as a matter of course "asserts his superiority through his sexuality" (Dance 181). In this regard, Johnson establishes in place among the likes of Stag, who in a sexual "tussle" copulates nine times before his partner "could move a muscle," and Dolemite who sodomized a "she elephant till she broke down in tears" (qtd. in Dance 228, 231).

Despite Johnson's elevation to hero status among his people, Johnson did not wholly reciprocate that affection. In his biography of Johnson, Randy Roberts observes that while Johnson's "conquest of white women was in part a desire to humiliate the white race, it was also because he preferred white women to black women." In fact, says Roberts, "his hatred of the white world was almost as deep as his longing to be part of it" (58).¹

Early in his professional career, Joe Louis would be carefully groomed to assume the role of the second heavyweight champion of the world. With white America's response to the flamboyance of Jack Johnson in mind, Louis' management was as much concerned with his social training as they were with his physical training. Louis was given instruction in basic etiquette and speech, but most importantly he was told to never be pictured alone with a white woman, and not to smile after defeating his white opponents (Ashe 11-12).

Nevertheless, Louis' status as a superior athlete among contenders who were predominantly white made him an

¹ Decades later during his "exile" from boxing, Ali would refuse to accept a stage and movie role portraying Jack

icon of empowerment for African Americans. Like Johnson before him, Joe Louis would be memorialized through song. Joe Pullum wrote one example of several blues recordings that celebrated Louis's triumphs:

Joe Louis is a battlin' man,
 The people think his fame will always stand.
 He's the brown bomber of this land,
 He's supposed to whup 'most any man . . .
 I said Joe is the battlin' man (Oliver
 145)

Unlike Johnson, Louis also became a symbolic representative for white Americans during the bouts when he faced Nazi Germany's Max Schmeling. For the most part, white America's iconization of him had little to do with sincere admiration; Louis happened to be up against someone that most of white America hated more. By rooting for Louis against Schmeling and Carnera who were seen as representatives of foreign oppressive regimes, many among the American mainstream fashioned for themselves the illusion that fascism and oppression were phenomena external to the American way of life. African Americans, of course, saw Louis as exclusively their hero. As Levine argues, Louis' status as culture hero would evoke

Johnson because it would require depicting Johnson's dalliance with white women (Ali 33).

interpretations of his bouts in metaphoric terms. Just as his defeat of Schmeling was interpreted as a blow against Nazi theories of racial superiority, his knock-out of the Italian Heavyweight Primo Carnera symbolized "triumph over the Italian oppressor whose invasion and bombing of Ethiopia had stirred deep anger throughout black America" (Levine 436).

The political and ideological climate of African America during the 1930's and 40's facilitated Louis's ascension to heroic status as the activism of the sixties would do for Ali's. Louis's career coincided with the continuance of Garvey Movement following Marcus Garvey's deportation and the rise of Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, as were American athletes that preceded him and most of those who followed, Louis was silent regarding the issues of his time. Despite the profound impact Louis had on the collective consciousness of African Americans, he had no sense of the magnitude of his symbolic importance.

Moreover, Louis was not aware of or unconcerned with the political and ideological circumstances of issue to the African American community which in many ways define the

impact of his significance to the masses. When members of the Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association communicated the symbolic importance of Louis' fight against Carnera, Louis was not aware of who Marcus Garvey or Haile Sallassie was. Ali would contrast strongly with Louis in this regard as he embraced the issues that were important to the African Americans of his time.

Nevertheless, while doing inside the boxing ring what many African Americans would have liked to do to white people, Louis behaved as a patriotic American outside the ring. Thus, as Moses describes in *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, Joe Louis was able to inspire group solidarity and ethnic pride by symbolizing at once the militancy of some African Americans and the yearning of others to gain social acceptance among white people (156).

By the time Cassius Clay entered the boxing world it had changed dramatically from the era during which Joe Louis was champion; the sport had become dominated by African American fighters. Yet Ali, like Johnson and Louis, quickly became the culture hero through whom the identity of African America was asserted. Most often, Ali's opponents, almost all of whom were African American,

would become the "white hopes" akin to the white opponents whom many Euro-Americans had hoped would reclaim the championship from Johnson and Louis. Though Ali consciously objectified his opponents often as representative of "the Establishment," their role as such was also the result of the African American community's adoration of Ali, the, the European American community's antipathy for him, and Ali's creation of his own character, which inspired both.

In his reading of Ali's autobiography, Gerald Early makes mention of this dynamic of cultural representation in reference to Ali's fight with Ken Norton. Many of Ali's other fights (such as the Floyd Patterson and Ernie Terrell fights) would serve as more vividly symbolic of the African American assertion of identity against European cultural dominance. Nevertheless, Early makes a keen observation here.

That the Negro, as an apolitical being, could be used to represent white interest and that the prize ring symbolized the dramatic conflict of a larger set of politics was what Ali revealed in this fight. Indeed, he showed that a Negro who was apolitical was, by virtue of his sheer inability to understand himself as a being with a political nature and political interest to protect, automatically a pawn for whites. In short, the apolitical black boxer was

inadvertently a political expression against Ali's assertion of himself as a political being in his own interest. (Early 80)

Just as the animal characters in African folktales are, as Van Sertima puts it, "involved in a shadow drama of the human world" (106), many of the boxing matches involving Johnson, Louis, and Ali symbolized the struggle for self-definition in which African Americans were involved. However, where Joe Louis and Jack Johnson emerged as cultural heroes by circumstances, Muhammad Ali claimed the role out of a sense of responsibility. His position as boxing champion provided a podium from which he would articulate his political ideology. The means by which he would disseminate his message were the verbal stylization embedded in the African American oral lore and traditions.

Just as Jack Johnson's immersion in his role as the badman involved his fulfillment of prevailing stereotypes regarding sexuality, Ali's use of the trickster paradigm involved the display of traits consistent with the buffoon stereotype. Much, if not most of Ali's public persona was clownish. Mollete and Mollete indicated that the use of comic irony is a typical tool of the trickster hero. They

point out that comic irony serves stylistically and functionally to enable the trickster hero to accomplish his tasks. That there is an guiding intellect that directs the use of clowning in the case of Ali was observed by his one-time mentor Malcolm X who commented that:

Not many people know the quality of the mind he's got in there. He fools them. One forgets that though a clown never imitates a wise man, the wise man can imitate the clown. (qtd. in Marqusee 75)

An astute observer, Malcolm X was one of the first to observe the trickster earmarks in Ali. In his autobiography he explained:

I suspected that there was a plan in his public clowning. I suspected, and he confirmed to me, that he was doing everything possible to con and "psyche" Sonny Liston into coming into the ring angry, poorly trained, and overconfident, expecting another one of his vaunted one-round knockouts. (304)

Malcolm was referring to the public campaign preceding the Liston fight which actually began as a means to pressure Liston into granting Ali(Clay) a title shot. The clowning Ali engaged in, which has since become legendary, included yelling insults and taunts from Liston's front lawn in the middle of the night. These theatrics bring to

mind the story of the Signifying Monkey² who, by using insults falsely attributed to the Elephant, convinces the Lion to angrily (and foolishly) confront the Elephant to his own demise. The distinction is that in Ali's case it's the trickster that does the "shit-talking" and the "ass-kicking."

The greatest similarity between Jack Johnson and Muhammad Ali lies in each man's audacity to consciously and openly defy the prevailing mores of the American mainstream even to the point of violating the law. That the laws that Johnson broke were miscegenation laws and the law Ali stood against was the military draft speaks volumes regarding difference between these men's confrontation with American society. Johnson's battle with America was to him a war between an individual and an oppressive society³ while Ali saw his own persecution (and triumphs, for that matter) as indivisible from that of the African American community. Joe Louis, on the other hand, not only maintained silence

² A version of this tale is recorded in Dance (197-99).

³ So private was Johnson's war with European America that during his reign as champion he refused challenges from the leading African American contenders. Thus, he limited the opportunities of his fellow African American boxers (Roberts 191).

in the face oppression, but when called upon, he became a spokesman and supporter of the status quo⁴.

While some critics contend that trickster characters reject morality as a form of rebellion, Ali (unlike Johnson) defines morality by means of rebellion. Mollette and Mollete (45) point out that African American folk heroes exhibit independent behavior that violates the expectations of the white establishment and act selflessly to transcend their individual needs. This heroic quality is no more eloquently illustrated than during Ali's costly refusal to participate in the Vietnam War.

Ali parts company with both Johnson and Louis in his willingness to use his status as a champion to become an advocate for the interests of African American people. As Farred correctly observes in his dissertation, Muhammad Ali "consciously fashioned himself as a spokesperson for the struggles of [African] Americans in the 1960s" (189).

While both Johnson and Louis came to realize, to some extent, their import to their people neither man viewed

⁴ For example, it seemingly did not trouble Louis to support the U.S. military through providing exhibitions and financial donations despite the fact that the armed services were segregated.

himself as a defender or champion of African American political interests.

In their discussion of heroic qualities in the context of African ritual drama, Mollette and Mollette write that

In an Afrocentric framework, the hero's actions and the outcome of his actions must transcend his individual needs. The hero must be a prototypical manifestation of the hopes, aspirations, and values of the group. An Afrocentric hero in the U.S.A. must behave in a manner that is independent and external to the expectations of the white establishment. (170)

Muhammad Ali fulfilled these criteria to a degree which neither of his predecessors had. Certainly, his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, his changing of his name (which he wisely did after winning the world championship), and his refusal to accept his drafting into the armed services, were not the best moves to further his career. While these actions went into the making of his image as the bad man, they ironically benefited him and fight promoters financially as a desire to see him lose motivated many to see his fights. Nevertheless, Ali's behavior indicated a blatant disregard for American expectations and the personal benefits that athletes generally received by complying with them.

In an article written during Ali's forced exile from boxing, Hans Massaquoi explains how Ali's defiance distinguished him from his predecessors.

Essentially, all of Ali's current problems have grown out of his stubborn refusal to fit himself into the role prescribed traditionally for a black heavyweight champion of the world. That role—eagerly sought and accepted by most of his predecessors—requires that the champ work tirelessly at being "a credit to his race" as defined by whites and white-washed blacks. It expects him to confine his opinions to matters of the ring, except when paying tribute to the system that allowed a kid from the slums to rise to prominence. In return for the proper enactment of his role, he is entitled to certain privileges and emoluments, including status, wealth, women (even white ones if that's what the champ prefers) and—above all—the unreserved adulation of white America. (178)

Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali each found himself in the position of representative of the aspirations of African American people. Yet, if one accepts Maulana Karenga's definition of Afrocentricity as "a quality of thought and practice rooted in the human interests and cultural image of African people" (36), only Ali can legitimately be identified as an Afrocentric cultural hero. Ali made a conscious effort to represent and articulate what he perceived to be the interests of his people. As he strove to do so, Ali utilized the cultural

agency with which he is intuitively familiar—the oral traditions and practices of African America.

CHAPTER SIX

TROPE-A-DOPE TO ROPE-A-DOPE: CLAY V. LISTON AND "THE RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE" AS AFRICAN RITUAL DRAMA

The noble warrior . . . answers a call that
neither begins nor ends with the bugle of the
battlefield but is the trumpet of the soul
sounding a higher note of loyalty to an ideal, a
cause, a god, or a nation.

Clyde W. Ford--

The Hero with an African Face

As previously argued, assessing the significance of Muhammad Ali as a cultural hero is best accomplished in the context of African and African American culture. An examination of Ali's fights, particularly the Liston-Clay and the Foreman-Ali championship bouts, are pivotal to this analysis when viewed as manifestations of African ritual drama. Ritual drama is the use of cultural artifacts in performance ritual that involves a communion between performer(s) and audience and which affirms communal values. While the prizefight is one of the oldest rituals of American popular culture, Ali transformed the sporting spectacle through the utilization of African ethos and cultural aesthetics into ritualized dramatic experiences

that happen to convey communal and spiritual ideals endemic to African ontology. Moreover, these sporting events, while within the draping of American popular culture, are undergirded and infused with verbal cultural practices and folkloric parallels and are informed by or have evoked a sense of national consciousness.

More than any of Ali's other boxing matches, the Liston and Forman bouts were won with more than just brilliant athletic skills. Like the trickster in African folklore, Ali used his opponents' weaknesses to defeat them. Like the Bantu hare and Brer Rabbit, Ali demonstrated the power of wit and cunning over brute strength. Thus, these fights which are major events in the folklore of Ali share traits with stories of African and African American folk tradition. Moreover, shaped by Ali's use of ritual, inspired by his ideas of spirituality, and influenced by his sense of a national consciousness, these fights are events that best illustrate the concerns of my thesis.

In the introduction to the drama anthology, *Kuntu Drama*, Paul Carter Harrison offers that in the context of African ritual drama the play is not "the thing" but rather

the thing is the event, i.e., "the total impact of environmental rhythms which massage our sensitivities and rouse the spirit" (7). African ritual drama places actual performance within the context of a larger act of ritual expression of communal values. Likewise, for Ali the actual boxing contest is only a part of the performance event.

Essentially all of Muhammad Ali's fights have followed a definite ritual form. The steps to this form include predictions of the fight outcome (often in limerick form) and insults cast upon his opponent. The performance ritual also included verbal taunting during the fight and ring theatrics such as the feigning of injury and the patented "Ali shuffle."

Ali's non-traditional boxing strategies that emphasized wit and adaptability¹ enhanced the distinct Africaness of the dramatic ritual. Of relevance to this point, Mollette and Mollette explain the distinction between Eurocentric and Afrocentric ideas of heroic

¹ The strategy used against Forman, which Ali later dubbed the "rope-a-dope" is the most vivid of these examples. Ali surprised even his own corner crew when he employed the tactic of leaning against the ropes and encouraging Forman to punch until he had tired himself out.

characteristics as they relate to physical strength and intellectual cunning:

Among the ways most compatible with traditional European assumptions is the exhibition of excellence in military or athletic skills. But African culture does not require the trait of aggressiveness as a criterion for achieving the status of hero. Instead, the criterion might involve the use of a nonaggressive athletic skill, accompanied by the exhibition of bravery, courage, and wit, to resolve a crisis, which can be exhibited in a number of ways. The use of strategy, in lieu of brute force, against an adversary in a serious context and the comic use of the rhetoric of diplomacy are two of the most frequently observed forms of wit that are used to achieve victory over one's adversary. (171)

The difference pointed out here parallels the distinction between Ali and either Forman or Liston. American sports commentators and analysts and the mainstream public clung tenaciously to the idea that brute strength was the determining factor for victory in a physical confrontation. Their inability to see otherwise intensified the impact of Ali's triumph over Liston and Forman. For this reason, these fights are major heroic events in the lore surrounding Ali.

The African roots of Ali's performance persona is further understood through interpreting the Dogon concept of *nommo*, the power to effect will through vocal utterance. *Nommo*, according to Harrison is the activating principle of

African ritual drama. That *nommo* is foundational to Clay/Ali's identity from the beginning of his career is hinted by the fact that he was noted for his mouth more than his fists by the press. Throughout his career as he boasted and made predictions, Ali angered and entertained the public by his insistence that his word, no matter how absurd, would be reality. One of his earliest poems, which appears on his recording, *I Am the Greatest*, is an example:

When I say three they go in the third
Don't bet against me; I'm a man of my word
If Cassius says a cow can lay an egg
Don't ask how—reach that skillet!

Prior to the Liston and Forman fights, a victory by Ali seemed to most sports analysts as likely as a cow laying an egg. In each of these fights, Ali was virtually the only one who believed his opponents were conquerable. As in the folktale of Shine and the Titanic, Ali was the first to point out that what white folks believed to be indestructible would sink.

Viewed through the lens of African folk culture, the Clay-Liston drama emerges as a revision of the battle between John Henry and the steam drill. Liston was appropriated by Ali and through the power of Ali's word reduced to a character within this drama. Liston is

submerged into the common trope of the machine/beast who is subdued by the trickster figure/culture hero.

Ali effectively inverted the traditional iconology of the boxing culture. Where brawn had reigned supreme its position would be usurped by grace. He even challenges concepts of masculinity by boasting of his prettiness. Clay made this clear as he gave reason for his worthiness for the championship instead of Liston: "He's too ugly to be world champ. The world's champ should be pretty like me" (qtd. in Hauser 61). At another point he says that Liston "needs talking lessons," thus judging Liston by the standard of African American community where the ability to talk is highly valued.

Liston was perfectly suited for the role of Ali's antagonist within an Afrocentric drama. Typically, in African ritual drama set in the European world, the villain is Euro-dominated society, which is represented by a particular character.

The heroic in African ritual drama would necessarily be rendered as iniquitous in a Eurocentric context. Thus, pride in the use of cultural artifacts such as the verbal rituals utilized by Ali would not be a virtue to the American mainstream. The effrontery demonstrated by Clay's

loquaciousness was an affront to the American sports culture during the time when Sonny Liston reigned as champion. The presence of criminal influence was more tolerable than Clay's boasting. As the popularity of boxing had waned during the 1950s, and there were no pressing international issues which required the propaganda that Joe Louis helped provide, the American mainstream was not as concerned that the heavyweight champion was not "a credit to his race."² Liston's rise was indicative of the presence of corruption in boxing as he was a formerly convicted criminal with a history as a Mafia henchman. Thus, Liston was the stereotype of the black brute. Despite his desire to be accepted as a respectable role model, the press focused attention on his criminal past. Nevertheless, Liston, quiescently dedicated to entertaining boxing fans as an unbeatable monstrosity, affirmed Euro-America's perception of African American men and therefore did not conflict with its sensibilities.

When viewed as a ritual of American cultural mainstream Clay was rendered the villain. Clay's deeper

² There was more concern among many African Americans, who saw the previous champion, Floyd Patterson as a more respectable representative of the masses. For further discussion on this matter see Remnick 15-16.

identification with African American culture is the sole reason why Liston would go from being a brute to being a defender of American virtues. Clay did not demonstrate the humility that was considered befitting of a sportsman and, more importantly, was expected of an African American. Through his boasting, which was nothing less than an assertion of African American verbal culture, Clay became the "uppity nigger" who did not know "his place," and Liston miraculously became the strong-arm for the American mainstream, whose job was to put him there. Writer Murray Kempton's account of the press' response to Clay's self-promoting theatrics speaks volumes regarding the dynamics of cultural representation within the context of American Euro-supremacist society:

Liston used to be a hoodlum; now he was our cop; he was the big Negro we pay to keep sassy Negroes in line, and he was just waiting until his boss told him it was time to throw this kid out. . . . Northern Italian journalists were comforted to see on Liston's face the look that Mafiosi use to control peasants in Sicily; promoters and fight managers saw in Clay one of their animals utterly out of control and were glad to know that soon he would be not just back in line but out of the business. . . . Even Norman Mailer settled in this case for organized society. Suppose Clay won the heavyweight championship, he asked. It would mean that every loudmouth on a street corner could swagger and be believed. (qtd. in Remnick 180)

Ali's boasting was concomitantly perceived as threatening within a Euro-dominated society and heroic in the context of African ritual drama. While specific reference to African Americans was masked in Kempton's remarks regarding Clay's potential influence on "loudmouth[s] on street corner[s]," Malcolm X was more explicit regarding mainstream America's animosity and fear towards Clay's self-promotion:

they knew that if people began to identify with Cassius and the type of image he was creating they'd have trouble out of these Negroes because they'd have Negroes walking around the streets saying "I'm the Greatest" and also Negroes who were proud of being black. (qtd. in Margusee 90)

Few people thought that Clay deserved a shot at the title (Houser 67-69; Remnick 141). As one sports writer stated, "the only one who demanded [the Liston-Clay bout] was Cassius, a precocious master of ballyhoo . . . he can't fight as well as he can talk." As the writer unwittingly suggests, Clay used his verbal performance as a means to bring about a championship opportunity. Demonstrating the power of *nommo*, Clay masterminded a publicity campaign to pressure Liston into giving him a bout. Using hyperbole and rhyme ("I'll hit Liston with so many punches from so many angles he'll think he's surrounded" (Clay, *I am the*

Greatest, CD, 1999).), Clay quite literally spoke the fight into existence.

Ali's campaign bears striking similarity to the verbal battle in the African epic of Sundiata which precedes the exiled king's confrontation with his enemy, Soumaoro. In the epic, the combatants are required to verbally affirm their worthiness for the throne of Mali (Niane 59-60). Thus, in Clay's affirmations of his qualifications for the championship he applies a ritual practice already immortalized in African literature.

In African ritual drama, *Nommo* empowers the hero to prevail over enemies (Mollette and Mollette 178). In the Clay-Liston drama, Clay's use of rhetoric was as much a means of destroying Liston as was his boxing strategy. As the signifying monkey does with the big bad lion, Clay used his verbal wit to get Liston to participate in his own demise. The drama was enhanced by the press' depiction of Liston as a formidable brute and Clay as fleet but frail. The effect of Clay's rhetoric was two-fold; it goaded Liston such that he would be angry rather than focused and instilled fear in him. For though Clay was not fearsome, especially in comparison to Liston, Liston was convinced that he was crazy.

The drama of the Liston fight was also noteworthy for the influence of Malcolm X on the life of the future Muhammad Ali. Through the mentoring of Malcolm, the icon of Ali as representative for African Americans and against white supremacist cultural hegemony was forged. After Malcolm became estranged from the NOI (and Ali) he sent a telegram reminding Ali of role as a representative of the non-European world: "Because a billion of our people in Africa, Arabia, and Asia love you blindly, you must now be forever aware of your tremendous responsibilities to them" (qtd. in Remnick 216).

It was through association with Malcolm X that Clay would begin to define himself in connection with the African world. Shortly following Clay's becoming champion, he was scheduled to make an African tour with Malcolm as his guide. Malcolm had already been touring the United Nations embassies with Clay, introducing him to many leaders of the African world. At the United Nations with Malcolm at his side, Clay declared that he was champion of the entire world, thereby redefining the role of heavyweight champion. Never before or since has a world champion heavyweight been seen as proprietary to any nation but the United States of America.

Along with Malcolm X, Ali's corner assistant, Drew "Bundini" Brown was one of Ali's most important influences. Bundini (an adopted Hindi name that according Brown means "mystic") reinforced Ali's connection with his sense of cultural identity. The best term to describe Bundini's role outside of his duties as corner man is "praise singer" not unlike the character in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. In Soyinka's play, the Praise Singer serves as a reminder to the king's horseman, Elesin, of his responsibility to his community and to the spirit world. Likewise, Bundini would remind Ali of his connection to the people and God and the larger than life significance of Ali's "mission." Ali would call on Bundini to "talk spiritual" to invigorate his resolve before his fights.³ (Bundini also helped compose much of Ali's verse including Ali's signature phrase, "Float like a butterfly, Sting like a bee.")

If Clay-Liston could be seen as a newer interpretation of the John Henry tale, Ali-Forman was a retelling of the African epic of Sundiata. The championship had eventually found its way to Forman after it had been taken from Ali by the boxing commission seven years prior. The fight was

significant in that it was Ali's opportunity to reclaim a title that he had never lost legitimately through competition. The venue of the fight, Kinshasa, Zaire, enhanced the poignancy of the event. Like Sundiata, Ali saw himself as an exiled king returning to his homeland to reclaim the kingdom that was wrongly usurped.

The familiar trope of wit versus brawn would play out in the drama of the Ali-Forman bout as it did with the Liston match. Forman had a reputation of being fearsome and invincible, as Sonny Liston had had ten years prior before Ali defeated him. Ali instantly drew comparisons between the Forman and Liston bouts:

It's befitting that I should go out of boxing just like I came in, beating a big bad monster who knocks everybody out and nobody can whup him. This man is supposed to annihilate me, but ten years ago they said the same thing about Sonny Liston. . . . I'm fighting another Sonny Liston. (qtd. in Hauser 271)

Only during his championship fight with Sonny Liston was Ali considered as much of an underdog. Nevertheless, he promised to upset the world: "You think the world was surprised when Nixon resigned; wait till I beat Forman's behind" (qtd. in *WWWK*).

³ See Plimpton 82.

Ali's pre-fight publicity revealed the limitations of his ideological and political connections to Africa. His ignorance was immediately evident in his dubbing the event the "Rumble in the Jungle" - a title clearly inspired by stereotypical misconceptions of the African continent. Though Ali's Americanism was evident, he nevertheless bonded with Zaire and its people.

That the Forman fight held spiritual and communal significance to Ali was obvious. While Ali drew spiritual strength from the counsel of Malcolm X before his fight with Sonny Liston, during the George Forman fight his spirit was fortified by the people of Zaire. Ali's ring physician, Ferdie Pecheco observed the energizing effect of the Zairian people on Ali:

He got more and more into the fact that he was in Africa. He was drawing this tremendous strength . . . because it was the time of a black awakening and he was one of the leaders of the black is best, black is beautiful (sic). And he seemed to be drawing all kinds of energy from that. (qtd. in *WWWK*)

While at the fight, writer Norman Mailer also observed the degree to which Ali was inspired by the people after the first round of the fight during what seemed to Mailer to be a moment of doubt for Ali. He describes what we know to be the African verbal ritual of call-and-response. His

description offers a vivid example illustrating its function to evoke reciprocal synergy between caller and audience:

Ali went back to the corner. The nightmare he had been awaiting in the ring had come to visit him (sic). He was in the ring with a man he could not dominate, who was stronger than him, who was not afraid him, who was gonna try to knock him out, and punched harder than Ali could punch. And this man was determined and unstoppable. And Ali had a look on his face that I'll never forget; it was the only time I ever saw fear in Ali's eyes. Ali looked as if he looked into himself and said, "Alright, this is the moment" . . .and then he turned to the crowd and went "Ali *bomaye*⁴!" and a hundred thousand people all yelled back, "Ali *bomaye*!" And this reverberation of the crowd came into the ring and Ali picked it almost as if [he were thinking] "These are my people. This is what I'm here for." (qtd. in *WWWK*)

In *When We Were Kings*, Ali is shown delivering a sermon that emphasizes a sense of what psychologist Wade Nobles (18) would call the extended self which links the individual with the community and a Supreme Being. The impromptu monologue, delivered while Ali simultaneously punches at the air, reveals how that connection enables Ali to accomplish what others foresaw as an impossible task--

⁴ This Lingala chant, which means "Ali, kill him!" was the battle cry that originated shortly after Ali's arrival in Zaire.

the defeat of the younger, stronger, and more formidable

George Forman:

I got a power I'm not going to even realize. I might look in his face and say "How did I do that? Allah. God. I'm his tool. God got in me on purpose. This is for my people. This man [Forman] looks slow. God has made this man look like a little kid. A so-called right hand ain't nothing now. Don't even feel him. I ain't got no fear of it. I walk right in and take my shots because I have God on my mind. I'm thinking of my people being free. And I can help with just one fight. Now he looks little in comparison to what I'm getting from [the fight]. He ain't nothing now. But if I think of me, just me, and George Forman knocked out Joe Frazier like he was God. George Forman knocked out Ken Norton. And the white press, the power structure ranked me to get tired in 5 or 6. Then I go in like Norton and the rest and get scared. But I'm not looking at the world and what they say; my God controls the universe. (qtd. in WWWK)

Traditionally, African ritual drama offers "images and inspirations intended to heal the community" (Fishman 133). Clearly, Ali's soliloquy shows that he perceived the fight as means of healing. Victory then becomes a divine imperative. Ali's only option is to win, as it is the will of God and the collective will of the people.

The importance of Ali's triumph in Zaire to the African world community was reminiscent of the communal significance of his comeback fight with Jerry Quarry in Atlanta in October 1970. The Quarry fight was Ali's first

since having his boxing license revoked in 1967. The fight was made possible primarily through the efforts of African American community leaders and the fact that Georgia did not have a boxing commission to legally obstruct the fight. In the words of Bundini Brown, the Quarry fight was "for the people." The symbolic importance of the fight to the African American community was captured in the observations of Jesse Jackson, then the leader of Operation Breadbasket, who was in attendance. Just prior to the event Jackson said:

If [Ali] loses tonight . . . symbolically, it would suggest that the forces of blind patriotism are right, that dissent is wrong, that protest means you don't love the country . . . They tried to railroad him. They refused to believe his testimony about his convictions and his religion. They wouldn't let him practice his profession. They tried to break his spirit and his body. Martin Luther King had a song; "Truth crushed to the earth will rise again." That's the black ethos. With [Ali] all we had was the hope, the psychological longing for his return. And it happened. In Georgia, of all places, and against a white man. (qtd. in Plimpton 88)

Ancestral presence through the evoking of the memory of the physically dead often figures prominently in African ritual drama. In Jackson's statement, he evokes the memory of Martin King. Ancestral presence was also affirmed by Bundini Brown who, as Ali entered the arena, shouted,

"Ghost in the house." The specter to which he was referring was Jack Johnson. The parallels between Ali and Johnson were clear that night.⁵ While Ali was figuratively exiled, Johnson was actually exiled from the country (for his marriage to a Euro-American woman). As Johnson did throughout his reign as champion, Ali happened to be facing that night an actual "white hope."

In African spiritual tradition, which is quite pronounced in African ritual drama, the distinction between the sacred and the secular is often blurred. According to Richards, African cosmology defines the sacred as "simply the experience of the ordinary, mundane, the secular and the human as the extraordinary, the social and the divine" (66). Ali adheres to this notion in his treatment of his sport performance, most demonstratively in the Liston and Forman fights, as holy mission. In this regard, Ali diverges from the standard teachings of Islam, which denounces sport as frivolous and worldly⁶. On this point, one might argue that Ali is more African than Muslim.

⁵ Ali noting his connection with Johnson spent time watching films on Jack Johnson before the Quarry fight. (See Plimpton's "Man in the Mirror.")

⁶ While most of the Islamic world including the NOI discouraged sports participation, Elijah Muhammad

In her essay, "The African Aesthetic and National Consciousness," Dona Richards writes that "African ritual drama is the mechanism/vehicle for transcendence" (66). Through both his conscious and unconscious attachment to an African ethos, Ali is able raise a sporting event that is traditionally rooted in the physically destructive exploitation of men to the level of spiritual fulfillment.

In another essay, "The Implications of African American Spirituality" Richards observes that ritual drama involves

a moment of eternity in which the right set of circumstances combines to create that special experience. It can occur anywhere (providing the right beings are present and the times is right), but more easily in some settings than others (222).

In the case of Ali's most epic battles, political circumstance, ritual practice, and African American ethos synergized to produce events that touched social and

particularly denounced boxing as "a wicked sport" that exploited African American men, pitting one against another, for the appeasement of Europeans. Paradoxically, he was said to be fond of Ali and proud of his accomplishments. Moreover, he allowed his son Herbert to serve as Ali's manager (See Clegg 247).

spiritual sensibilities that Africans and African Americans could feel if not name.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Commenting on the tactics Ali used against Forman, his corner man, Wali Muhammad, said that "fighting off the ropes was the wrong thing to do, but it was the right thing to do" (qtd. in Hauser 276). That oxymoron defines what Ali became and why he was an African American cultural hero. It has been observed by adherents to traditional boxing style that, as a fighter, Ali did everything wrong. He held his hands too low, punched while moving backwards which are violations of basic boxing technique. As an athlete who is generally expected to perform for an audience indifferent to his ideas, Ali spoke when he was supposed to be silent, and was rebellious when he was supposed to be patriotic.

At the press conference following his victory over Sonny Liston (at which he formally announced his membership in the Nation of Islam), the soon-to-be Muhammad Ali told an indignant group of reporters "I don't have to be what you want me to be." Thus, he firmly planted himself in a

tradition of human affirmation to which Rosa Parks contributed when she refused to relinquish her seat to a white man in 1957. Both Ali's declaration and Parks' defiance symbolize departure from European imposed limitations. Parks' act was a refusal to accept second-class status while Ali's statement defied the role expectations of the traditionally acquiescent and patriotic African American athlete who gratefully performs for and conforms to the American mainstream.

Being motivated by the need to be self-defining, Ali drew from the richness of African verbal culture and exploited the media attention inherent in his profession create himself as a mythic hero who became and will long remain remembered.

To bring full appreciation of the creation of Muhammad Ali necessitates placing him in the proper analytical context. Establishing an appropriate frame of reference involves placing Ali in the historical context of a representative figure in the African American tradition. That tradition began with Jack Johnson, followed by Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and Jackie Robinson who were perceived by African Americans as cultural heroes. Ali's distinction

from his heroic predecessors was that he adhered willingly to a national consciousness that reflected his identification with African American people.

Defining Ali and his significance also entails assessing his practice of African American verbal culture and his utilization of models from African and African American heroic/trickster folklore. From the folk culture of African America, Ali inherited the verbal strategies of signifying and woofin,' the verbal art of the toast and the boast, and trickster and culture hero character archetypes that influenced his self-characterization.

By comparing Muhammad Ali's most epic battles with the tradition of African ritual drama one gains further insight to the significance of cultural influences on the making the man who called himself the "Greatest fighter of all time." In the tradition of ritual drama, Ali's fights against Liston, Quarry, and Foreman, illustrated more than the others how Ali shaped his prizefights into events which affirmed his connection with the African world community and the worldview they share.

This study is in part motivated by a need to rescue Ali from the attempt (which has thus far been successful)

to distort the significance of Ali that has accompanied his growing popularity in recent years.

The recent surge of attention to Muhammad Ali in recent years pays insufficient attention the impact of African American, and by extension, African, culture in the creation of Ali. Ali is first and foremost an African American folk hero. Ali was also an oral artist. It was his oral artistry rooted African American oral culture that provided the means by which Ali created himself as a cultural hero. Ali's conscious identification with African America was the inspiration for this image-shaping project. The need to articulate an Afrocentric definition of Muhammad Ali is in part response to an attempt to overly Americanize him and diminish his the Africanity of his character.

The public receptiveness in response to Ali during the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games illustrated the degree to which Ali has been appropriated as an American icon. Ironically, Ali is now warmly embraced by a society that once saw him as a loudmouth, a racist, and a traitor. (When Muhammad Ali was paid to attend promotional screenings of a television documentary, he mused, "Twenty-

five years ago, they wouldn't let me fight to earn a living and now they're paying me \$100,000 to go to the movies."¹)

The factors that contribute to the emergence of Ali as an American hero were the transformation of the character of the Nation of Islam into the American Muslim Mission, the failure of the Vietnam War, and the traditional practice of diffusing the potency of African American icons by rendering them American.

When Warrith Deen Muhammad succeeded his father, Elijah Muhammad, as leader of the Nation of Islam, he not only changed its religious character; he altered its political character. Warrith Deen Muhammad consciously transformed the organization into an apolitical religious institution that welcomed European Americans into its ranks. Thus, Ali's membership in a "separatist hate-group" was no longer a reason for mainstream America's animosity.

However, Ali's endearment to America has more to do with the evolving of America than the evolution of Ali. Arguably, Ali contributed to that growth. The anti-war movement of which Ali was a dominant symbol turned the tide of public acceptance against the war. Along with the

¹ See Hauser's *Muhammad Ali: In Perspective*, 167.

resignation of President Nixon, Ali's regaining the heavyweight championship validated the protest era for the American mainstream. Thus, while the Liston fight established Ali as a public enemy, the Foreman victory marked the beginning of his acceptance by the American establishment (Marquess 277).

Ali's appeal is due in no small part to his humanitarian efforts and gestures (which were always evident, though not always noted, during his career) that are perceived as consistent with American liberalism in a "color-blind" society. However, it should be noted that appreciation of the humanity of all as melodramatized in King's "I have a dream" or Malcolm X's letters from Mecca has strong roots in classical African tradition but is merely cosmetic to American sensibilities.

Dona Marimba Richards speaks of the use of symbols and the American mainstream's tendency to revise characters of African American heroes as a means of cultural self-adulation. Commenting specifically on the transformation of Martin King into an American symbol, she insists on the reclamation of African American icons:

They rob the symbol of its power through association with white American acceptance, as

they represent Dr. King to us as "Martin" the non-violent integrationist who is loved by America. Our job is to refuse to relinquish the power of the ikon (sic), by insisting on African definition. (Richards 78)

This analysis of Muhammad Ali is intended to offer African definition by viewing him in the context of African and African American verbal culture, myth, and self-determination.

As the American mainstream drapes the American flag around Muhammad Ali, it is important to recognize that his status as hero began with his endearment to African Americans for disgracing the flag and "the republic for which it stands." This practice of symbol appropriation distorts the significance of the work and philosophy of the person thus appropriated. Given the American dispensation to embrace illusion and distort history, it behooves African American studies scholars to provide analyses of African American heroic icons that clarifies and documents those aspects of African culture that produced these heroes.

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